

## Assessing New Right approaches to education

The New Right are important in the Sociology of the Education system, first as a **critique** of educational policy as established in the making of educational policy by the Social Democratic approach and secondly as a series of **reforms** associated with conservative (and Conservative) politicians since 1979..

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### The New Right vs Social Democratic Policies

**Social Democratic** policies dominated educational policy throughout the post-war period from the **1944 Act** onward. It is thoroughly associated with the creation of the Welfare State and is underpinned by the idea that education is a **human right**, which should be available to all. In this model more education is inevitably better and fairness in educational provision is essential. It is this idea that informs the expansion of education for all, the continuous Raising of the School Leaving Age (ROSLA), the development of Comprehensivisation and the creation of new universities and polytechnics in the 1960s. The attack on the privileges of independent schools also reflected this attitude. Schools existed to engage in *social engineering* for a **meritocracy**.

**New Right** theorists questioned possible unthinking assumptions of this approach, in its drain on economic resources, the lack of vocational education useful to industry, and the assumption that education was not a **commodity, a service like any other, best allocated through a free market**, as with independent schools. This might be described as **economic liberalism**.

There is also a deeply **conservative** tendency in the New Right, concerned with the maintenance of family, community and social stability. Here there was concern that an education system that simply allowed teachers to make decisions as to what was taught and how would fail to reinforce traditional standards and **could** be subversive of social cohesion. Challenging the ownership of education by professionals and trying to relocate it within the community might also address this. This could be seen as interventionist (and expensive!). These two tendencies may not fit together well.

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### The New Right in Power: Seven Examples

**1988 (Baker) Education Act** - In the many provisions of this act the main themes of New Right thinking may be discerned. The creation of **GM schools**, funded directly by Government and controlled by local governors re-established community control. Standards would be maintained through a **National Curriculum** frequently tested, **League Tables** and the new inspecting authority **Ofsted**. The provision of choice for parents (assisted by more information) meant that market forces could increase efficiency.

**New Vocationalism** - This policy is associated with the development of **GNVQ** and **NVQ** qualifications and the increase of direct links between the education system and industry.

**Assisted Places Scheme** - This early measure provided **financial support** to able students to enter the **independent school system** thus supporting the schools as well as the students.

**Vouchers** – There has long been interest in Conservative circles in the introduction of vouchers that would meet the cost of education for children. These could be offset against private school fees. This has not yet been implemented to any great extent in the mainstream system although vouchers were introduced to meet part costs of nursery and preschool education under the Major government.

**Academisation and Free Schools** – further extending the **marketization** of education

**The return of selection** – with the new acceptance of **grammar schools**.

**University fees** – individuals should pay for themselves – market forces will decide.

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### Sociological Perspectives on the New Right

There are strong similarities between aspects of New Right theory and aspects of **Functionalism** - some might regard these policies as meeting the needs outlined by **Durkheim** and **Parsons** for our modern industrial society.

**Liberal** thinkers would criticise the lack of understanding of the individual's need for self actualisation through education rather than the simply conservative and economic approaches here.

**Marxists** have criticised the way that vocational education encourages social reproduction, as working class children are hived off into "appropriate courses". **Dan Finn** and **Paul Willis** have been particularly associated with this critique. As to tradition, Marxists would ask *whose tradition?* and *for whom?*

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### Influential?

Many have argued that New Right policies have dramatically changed what is politically possible in Modern Britain, and that between 1997 and 2010, New Labour **accepted much of the ideology of the New Right** though sometimes mixed with Social Democratic ones, e.g., the Education Maintenance Allowance. Similar policies do exist under **coalition** and Conservative governments but with the growth of marketization and selection, we have seen a revival of a more "**full blooded**" New Right approach.