

*This is an abridged version of a chapter in *Can the Prizes Still Glitter: The Future of British Universities in a Changing World*, the first book by Agora, the new higher education think tank, and published by the University of Buckingham Press. See [www.agora-education.org](http://www.agora-education.org).*

## Boris Johnson: We must stop telling all these white lies

Published: 17 May 2007

I thought of our tendency to collective hypocrisy the other day, when a group of vice-chancellors was discussing the problems of widening access to higher education. It was a gloomy discussion. Huge efforts were being made to reach out to schools and families that did not traditionally see themselves as university feeders. Undergraduates were all out proselytising and evangelising the benefits of a university education. Yet we are still stuck on 14 per cent of Group D who make it to university, and 77 per cent from Group A, and that position has been unchanged for 20 years.

I was slightly taken aback when, at the end of the discussion, every vice-chancellor agreed, with sad shakings of the head, that it was much simpler when we had grammar schools. When there were grammar schools, they said, there was a ladder for poor bright kids, and it was a doddle for top universities to recruit from the maintained sector.

Of course they were being smart, and subtly throwing the problem back at me, the politician; because they know there is not a cat's chance in hell of any party bringing back grammar schools, en masse. The grammar school solution was too brutal, and so we took that option away in most of the country, and in so doing removed the unpleasant divisiveness and, of course, the ladder for the bright poor. But it is just not true that in abolishing most grammar schools we have done away with selection in our schools. That is the Great White Lie number one: that the British ruling classes are prepared to see equality of opportunity for children of all socio-economic backgrounds.

In polite lefty circles it is still taboo to talk about the boom in tutoring for primary school children. Well-heeled Islington parents feel all warm inside because they are doing the local primary school the favour of sending it their well-adjusted middle-class progeny. But all the while they ensure that when the moment comes they will be ready to flee the benighted borough by providing them with private tutoring. Tony Blair just about kept up the fiction that he and Cherie used state education until it was revealed that he hired private tutors from Westminster, one of the most selective schools in the country, to get his children ready for university.

It is always the middle classes who are able to manipulate this supposedly universalist system. If there is a good church school, it is they who have the time and the wit to do the necessary in the eyes of the Lord to get their children in. If there is a good school in a certain area, it is they who have the economic throw-weight to move.

And so we bully the universities into remedying injustices that have been perpetrated long ago at primary level, and we make them sign access agreements and all the rest of it, and above all, in the run-up to university entrance, we try to conceal the growing attainment gap between the maintained and the independent/grammar school sectors.

We do this by splurging ever more A-grades at candidates. In 1966 the proportion getting an A in A-level mathematics was seven per cent. In 2006 it was 43.5 per cent. You do the maths. How much better are today's A-level students? It's about 620 per cent. Do you believe that? Neither do I. Even allowing for the possibility that the comparison is unfair, and that the exam may have changed, it is obvious that there is serious grade inflation, and that is the second Great White Lie: that standards are rising all the time, and that our children are getting brighter and brighter.

The result of this polite fiction is, again, to damage the interests of the underprivileged. Faced with a load of A grades and a load of candidates who seem equally qualified, employers are once again asking whether the applicant went to a good school, and that is deeply socially regressive.

It is not electorally profitable for a politician to say all this. You sound like a whinger. You sound like a stick-in-the-mud. You sound like a miserable old right-wing laudator temporis acti, and even if people may collectively agree with the logic of your assertions, each parent is individually making a very different calculation. Each will calculate that their child is better off getting a depreciated A than an inflation-proof B or a C. So the lie goes on year after year.

Whatever its shortcomings, British higher education has been an outstanding success. But the next Tory government will be wholehearted in its determination to widen access and to reignite the social mobility that has fizzled under this Government. We can't do that unless we are more honest about the current bifurcation in our school system, and the first step is to stop telling the Great White Lies.