

How MPs' own education impacts on children's today



LES WALTON
COLUMNIST

It has always been interesting to me that politicians often promote the type of education they received when they were little. Many Secretaries of State often favour a system that favoured them.

This usually does not hold with surgeons, architects and generals who would rarely wish for the return of cancer treatment without hormone therapy, buildings with asbestos or Second World War tanks. Education is a peculiar business. Often we go round in circles.

The first female Minister of Education, Ellen Wilkinson, was a major supporter of the selective system. Ellen had gone to university from a working class home. Born in Manchester on October 8, 1891, the third of four children of a cotton operative, she won scholarships to Stretford Road Secondary School and Manchester University.

Very much like Theresa May, she developed strong loyalties to the selective secondary education which she considered had helped her to gain access to higher education.

However, there were differences. Ellen's red hair and diminutive size earned her the nicknames 'Red Ellen' and the 'Fiery Participle'. A contrast with Theresa May! Another difference was that, unlike Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May, well known grammar school pupils, Ellen was a former member of the Communist Party.

In 1912 she joined the Independent Labour Party. In 1920 she became one of the original members of the Communist Party of Great Britain and in the following year she visited Moscow as a British Communist representative. In 1923 she was elected as a Communist to Manchester City Council. Though she retained her Communist Party membership, it was as the official Labour candidate that she successfully contested Ashton under Lyne in the same year.

For a number of years after the conclusion of the First World War, Wilkinson was a member of the executive of the Plebs League. The league was the founder of the Plebs Magazine.

In 1924, having severed her connection with the Communist Party, she was elected to Parliament as the



MP Ellen Wilkinson and Jarrow Crusade marchers in 1936

Labour member for Middlesbrough East. She lost this seat in 1931 when she was a fiercely hostile critic of Ramsay MacDonald but returned to Parliament in 1935 as a member for Jarrow. Three years later she published *The Town That Was Murdered*, in which she set forth, in detail, the history of Palmer's shipyard, and drew from Jarrow's bitter experience, after it had been closed, an indictment of capitalism and a reasoned plea for a planned Socialist economy.

In 1936 she headed the march of the Jarrow unemployed to London.

When Churchill became head of the Coalition Government in 1940, she was appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Pensions and later in the same year one of the two Parliamentary Secretaries to Herbert Morrison at the Ministry of Home Security.

It was apparently at her own urgent request that she was appointed Minister of Education. There is a story that, to be first woman to be minister, she left Jarrow for London by the night train immediately she knew she was re-elected to Parliament. She saw in it a unique opportunity to strike a resounding blow for the 'underprivileged' children of England and Wales.

As Minister of Education her main task was to implement the provision of the 1944 Education Act. She then raised the question of the school leaving age. Ellen estimated that the first stage of the 'Raising the School Leaving Age' scheme. (ROSLA) would require the creation of over 200,000 new school places. Her

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plans to increase the school-leaving age to 16 had to be abandoned when the government decided that the measure would be too expensive.

On February 6, 1947 'The Death of Miss Wilkinson, A Champion of the Working Class' was announced. She died at St Mary's Hospital, Paddington, aged 55. The cause was described as heart failure following an attack of bronchitis. For months she had been unwell, affected by asthma. There is another view that, depressed by her failure to bring in all the reforms she believed necessary, she took an overdose of barbiturates. In April, one month after her death, after the Treasury had sought unsuccessfully to delay ROSLA, the school leaving age was raised to 15.

The Times Educational Supplement in February 1947 described her courage and cheerfulness. She was described as a 'heroic and loveable character', with a quick temper and first-rate moral and physical courage.

George Tomlinson MP, of Farnsworth, succeeded Ellen Wilkinson as Minister of Education. He was educated at Rishton Wesleyan Day School in Lancashire and at the age of 12 went to work as a half-timer in a weaving shed. This experience would then shape his view of education. George expanded secondary education, which he never had.

Of course what Secretaries of State decide, in the end, will impact on children.

A long-standing friend and close colleague of mine, Brian Oglethorpe (former headteacher of Oxclose Comprehensive and Principal Adviser Sunderland), recounts his time in an 11-plus preparatory class in Canning Street School, Newcastle, in 1947. He remembers pupils "being flogged with considerable frequency and well-practised technique with a leather strap on his hands for even such slight misdemeanours as blots on exercise books or repeated spelling mistakes." Also "jumping through the intelligence-testing hoops and being on the top row of desks in the back of the class - desks arranged from the back strictly according to ability."

1947-48 was also the year selection took place for grammar, technical school or up the stairs to Senior School in Canning Street. After a series of tests administered by the headmaster at Canning Street, Brian was told he had a place at Rutherford Grammar School - many of his friends were destined for the top floor with others in Canning Street.

A young Brian Oglethorpe would never have realised that his experience was a result of the experience of a red-haired former communist with a fiery temper.

■ Les Walton CBE is chair of the Northern Education Trust.