

The future of grammar schools

Two Reading based grammars provide places for pupils from my constituency. These are popular with parents. The comprehensives also attract talented pupils, so the sixth forms of the local comprehensives can also provide a good A level education and offer a platform for gaining places at top universities for those who are academically inclined. As a result I have not encountered jealousy of the grammars on the doorsteps from those whose children just missed out on a grammar place. There are clearly too few grammar school places for all the able children who might like to attend.

The government has now said it will make some additional money available to expand grammar places at those schools who would like to do so. This seems to me unremarkable, as around Wokingham we need to expand the number of schools places in general to keep up with demands from all the new housing with many more people moving into the area. If we are going to carry on with grammars amongst the choices open to parents and pupils, we should allow them to expand if they wish.

I would be interested to hear your views on this latest development. Selection still seems to evoke strong criticism in some quarters, though most seem to accept the need for selection when it comes to university places. It is also easier to teach well if pupils are streamed or grouped in schools, as different ability and effort levels require different instruction. In the adult world there is a lot of selection, with professional qualifications and competitions for top jobs being a feature of business life.

The good news is it is often the individuals who did not compete strongly for academic laurels who go on to be the most successful entrepreneurs and sports personalities. Life is full of challenges and competitions, so there are prizes for all sorts of exertion and skill. Getting into a grammar does not guarantee long term success. Not getting into a grammar does not stop success and a good career.

Mr Willetts wants to penalise savings and home ownership

The Resolution Foundation has come up with a cruel blockbuster this time in its efforts to create an intergenerational war in the UK. They argue that older people have too much of the country's wealth, and recommend taxing pensions and homes much more to pass the money on to younger people.

They ignore the obvious point that in all past generations older people have more of the wealth than younger people. Most of us start out with no

assets. You work up to buying a home of your own on a mortgage, and start to put savings away for rainy days, and gradually build up a pension pot. As people now live longer they may spend many years in retirement, so they need a substantial level of savings to see them through their remaining years.

Most bizarre is the Foundation's idea that many older people have done well out of house price rises. Most people just own the home they live in. As most wish to carry on living in it, they cannot use the gains they have made for some other purpose. The people who ultimately gain are the younger people or the charities who inherit the money on death.

Worse still is the Foundation's prescription to deal with this misinterpreted problem. They want to charge people more for living in their own home if it has gone up in value – £2.3bn more for the country as a whole. They want to charge people extra tax on their pensions in payment, placing an NI charge on top of their Income tax on the pension receipt! They want to impose more NI on any earnings people add to their pension.

You do not make the young rich by making the older poor. Tackling some poverty in old age has been a success story, so why now go back on it and try to impoverish the prudent? I agree with them that we can and should do more to help young people with home purchase and with university fees.

Trying to pit one generation against another is unpleasant politics. In many families there is a spirit of mutual help between the generations. Where parents and grandparents have surplus savings they do often help young people to pay their way through education or to acquire their first home.

Local issues dominated the Borough Council results

I found on the doorsteps a welcome wish to talk about the local matters our Councillors decide for us in the run up to last Thursday's election.

The Conservative loss of three seats in Wokingham itself seemed to be related to the delays in finishing the town centre, the disruptions to the roads brought on by building work, and the general pressures on services created by fast development and the level of congestion.

I will be talking to the Council about what more can be done to improve the congestion and development problems, and how the impact of building works can be mitigated more. The Council has embarked on a major highways construction programme to ease the lack of capacity as more homes become available, and has put in extra secondary school capacity with the provision of Bohunt.