Caroline Benn: Champion of Democratic Education
History of Education Lecture Series
Goldsmiths, University of London
21 June 2016

Jane Martin,
Professor of Social History of Education
All of us who have spent a teaching life within comprehensive schools and those who have received a comprehensive education should remember Caroline Benn

Chris Searle, 2001
A Cincinnati Girl in the 1930s
Ohio River Flood, 1937
Educated in the USA and Britain
Archive Stories: Norman Rockwell, ‘The Prom Dress’ March 1949
Socialist soulmate

“The thought of stagnating in Ohio had dragged me down to the bottom of the well. I couldn’t face forever after in some split-level house, just an open-ended coffin with a New England lantern out at the end of the driveway...”
“Imagine what it must have been like being married to someone like Tony Benn. I mean it’s ‘cause you normally just marry a bloke, not a sort of whirlwind, you know? And yet she managed to just stay normal.”
A woman’s life/ a political life
“She did all the things that a conventional politician’s wife did while also being a politician in her own right…”
12 Holland Park Avenue, 1952-2000

“My home really became a centre of campaigning on comprehensive education.”

Tony Benn 19 December 2013
‘Opportunity’ in a Meritocracy

Sidney Webb’s “capacity catching” scholarship system

This view of the world encouraged a competitive outlook, using the divided education system to sift out the leaders of tomorrow.
A school that takes all the kids from any one place: you, me, Linus, Sally, Schroeder, etc.

If that's so, then how can a grammar school and a comprehensive school be in the same place??

Because Mrs. Thatcher says so, stupid!!

COMPREHENSIVE
ISSUE NUMBER 20

EDUCATION
SPRING 1972 50p
‘Equality’ in a Democracy

“I think she saw the nature of a system which she thought was unfair. Thought how can we change it? Worked out in conjunction with others the best way of doing it and then campaigned for it and argued for it on the basis of her own experience of it ... and she became very controversial and that’s how the term radical got applied to her.”

Tony Benn to Jane Martin 19 December 2013
“Nobody else was doing that, you know, actually chronicling – well more than chronicling, she was analysing the spread of comprehensive institutions and practices across the country”
A jewel in the crown of the new world of the schools?

“I was Alice… everything was Wonderland and this was how I had all my experience at Holland Park School…”
“The media took naturally to exaggerating problems, relaying odd incidents as if they were universal practice, and linking the equality drive to violence, vandalism, bullying, drugs, arson and indiscipline in comprehensives...”
“They had a Chair of Governors who was actually completely involved in the comprehensive movement in a way that other schools didn’t...”
Thirty Years On
Is Comprehensive Education Alive and Well or Struggling to Survive?

Caroline Benn and Clyde Chitty

SECONDARY MODERN
GRAMMAR

≠

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM
“Personal events often get elbowed out of male political biography, which tends to centre on the pursuit of power. ...”
“She obviously had a massive influence on him so he, in fact, represented a certain amount of power for her...”
Learning the Lessons

One thing I’ve learned in this business [of politics] just because something is a) right and b) true and c) inevitable, it does not mean you do not have to keep saying it over and over and over and over. Using every chance there is.”

Caroline Benn to Brian Simon, 20 June 1977
“The thing about Caroline was that she kept her own principles. She had principles and she was her own woman. She kept her own life and just worked incredibly hard…”