

Caroline Benn: Champion of Democratic Education

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Caroline Benn Timeline

	1926	Born October 13, Cincinnati, Ohio
Ohio River flood	1937	
	1948	Graduates from Vassar College Meets Tony Benn 2 August
Marries Tony Benn 17 June	1949	
	1951	Gives birth to her first child, Stephen; completes University of London MA
Gives birth to her second child, Hilary	1953	
	1957	Gives birth to her third child, Melissa
Gives birth to her fourth child, Joshua	1958	
	1962	Her novel <i>Lion in a Den of Daniels</i> published
Labour Party win general election	1964	
	1965	Comprehensive Schools Committee Editor <i>Comprehensive Education</i>
Reads <i>Charlotte's Web</i> by E.B. White on Jackanory, BBC	1966	
	1970	Chair of governors, Holland Park School Member Inner London Education Authority Co-author <i>Half Way There: Report on the British Comprehensive School Reform</i> (with Brian Simon)
President Socialist Education Association	1973	
	1978	UNESCO Education Commissioner
Television film, <i>Carry On Comprehensives</i>	1980	
	1982	Co-author <i>Higher Education for Everyone</i>
Editor & contributor to National Labour Movement Inquiry Into Youth Unemployment & Training	1987	
	1992	Author <i>Keir Hardie: a biography</i>
Co-author <i>Thirty Years On: is comprehensive education alive and well or struggling to survive?</i> (with Clyde Chitty)	1996	
	1998	Retires as governor of Holland Park School
Dies at Charing Cross hospital, London, 22 November	2000	

*"Caroline Benn was educated in the USA and Britain, and teaches in adult education. Since 1965 she has been the editor of *Comprehensive Education* and research officer of the national Campaign for Comprehensive Education. Among her publications is *Half Way There, Report on the British Comprehensive School Reform*, written with Brian Simon in 1970. From 1970 to 1976 she was a member of the Inner London Education Authority, and since 1974 she has been a member of the United Kingdom Commission of Unesco. She is married to Tony Benn; they have four children."*¹

Texts and Testimonies

“She was intellectually and politically a woman without doubt, she knew the comprehensive ideal was the right way and for her the problem was how to get there....”

“She did all the things that a conventional politician’s wife did while also being a politician in her own right.”

“I think she was instrumental in keeping that school open actually...”

“The one thing about Caroline which you have to mention is how beautifully dressed she always was and she was a lovely woman physically. She was a beautiful woman...”

Comprehensive Schools Committee

Statement of Aims - We wish to see equality of opportunity in education achieved by:

1. The elimination of selection, by examination or any other means, at the age of transfer to secondary education.
2. The end of the segregation of children in different types of secondary school, and the rejection of the idea that separate but equal types of education can or should be provided.
3. The exploration of different ways in which the comprehensive ideal may be realised.
4. The rapid introduction of comprehensive education and the provision by the Government of the necessary resources.

Derek Rushworth (head Holland Park School, 1971-85):

“How pitiable is the concern for Inner London’s education system expressed by Mrs Gumbel (*Letters*, November 19) of Kensington and Chelsea. What, I wonder, does she think the occupation of the husband of the chairman of governors of Holland Park School has to do with the examination results of that school? Mrs Gumbel exposes by her innuendo the political background to the whole smear campaign against the school. Its “unique catchment area” includes the worst slums in London, which are, need I say it, the responsibility of the borough council on which Mrs Gumbel has the honour to sit and in which she exercises considerable influence. It is ‘pure arrogance’ on her part to sit in her council seat and pontificate about examination percentages.”²

The Myth of Giftedness

“Ours is not an argument that there are no children with unique talent. Quite the reverse. It is because we believe in human genius that we oppose all attempts to regiment it, or to commandeer it for the purpose of preserving what is basically a school system designed for a social elite. Nor do we regard general ‘giftedness’ as a distinct property any more than we accepted ‘11-plus ability’ as such. Giftedness is what education itself helps to create and release, and the purpose of education is to help foster as many gifts as possible in as many children as possible... A comprehensive system is the only way we can openly ensure attention to all equally and at the same time protect and reveal the full range of human gifts. Encouraging human genius, and developing human gifts, is just one more reason why we must continue to work to get a genuine comprehensive education safely started in Britain, and to promote it relentlessly when we have.”³

Caroline Benn Society

The Caroline Benn Society will build on the traditions of research and scholarship Caroline established in her books on the comprehensive reform: *Halfway There* (with Professor Brian Simon) and *Thirty Years On* (with Professor Clyde Chitty). The aim of the Caroline Benn Society is to: 1) Consolidate the history of comprehensive education. 2) Establish the Caroline Benn Digital Archive. 3) Generate a broadly based programme of research on comprehensive education.

Contact details

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¹C. Benn (1979) ‘Elites versus Equals: the Political Background to the Comprehensive Reform’ in *Education & Equality* edited by D. Rubinstein, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 191.

² Letters, *Evening Standard*, 1 December 1976. Caroline Benn papers, CB XL1 Box 41/1. Holland Park School 1970-1978.

³ C. Benn (1982) ‘The Myth of Giftedness (Part II)’, *Forum* 24 (3), pp. 83-4.