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Gallagher, T. (2021). A problem of policy paralysis. A response to 'the rise and fall and rise of academic selection: The case of Northern Ireland', by Martin Brown et al. *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 32(2), 503-506. <https://doi.org/10.1353/isia.2021.0067>

Published in:
Irish Studies in International Affairs

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
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Irish Studies in International Affairs, Volume 32, Number 2, Analysing and Researching Ireland, North and South 2021, pp. 503-506 (Article)

Published by Royal Irish Academy

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/isia.2021.0067>



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A Problem of Policy Paralysis

A RESPONSE TO ‘THE RISE AND FALL AND RISE OF
ACADEMIC SELECTION: THE CASE OF NORTHERN
IRELAND’, BY MARTIN BROWN *ET AL.*

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The paper by Martin Brown and colleagues traverses well-trodden ground in Northern Ireland and does a creditable job in highlighting the most recent evidence. Academic selection was introduced by the Northern Ireland parliament in 1947, broadly following the pattern of legislation based in Westminster in 1944. The 1947 Act established (mostly free) post-primary education differentiated into academically selective grammar schools and non-selective secondary schools—a post-14 strand for technical education never flourished and eventually disappeared. Supporters of academic selection claim it provides a basis for educating young people on the basis of their ability, that the means of selection is fair and untrammelled by social background and that therefore it provides a basis for social mobility.

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.3318/isia.2021.32b.41>

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Ironically, the 1947 Act in Northern Ireland was opposed by many grammar schools, leading to the formation of the Governing Bodies Association. They were concerned they would have to go ‘cap in hand’ to government every time they wanted funds for maintenance or building, and that they would be handing control of their admissions process to local authorities. The compromise agreed was to create two types of grammar schools, one of which accepted a higher proportion of pupils through the selective arrangements in return for capital grants; the other of which received no capital grant, could charge whatever level of fees it wanted and was not required to reserve a specific proportion of places for pupils allocated by the local authorities. By 1950/51 over half the grammar schools had opted for the latter status, representing ‘a major setback for the principles enunciated under the 1947 education act, and in particular for the ideal of providing a network of grammar schools accessible to all pupils of ability regardless of their parents’ financial means.’¹

Notwithstanding this partial commitment to meritocratic principles at the outset in Northern Ireland, the core justification for academic selection across many parts of Europe was largely based on psychological claims from the 1930s that intelligence was innate, fixed and measurable at an early age. Furthermore, it was claimed that individual children of ability from poor households had been denied opportunity by the system of fees charged by schools prior to the reforms. The use of a ‘scientific’ selection instrument, or 11+ as it came to be labelled, would allow those children to be identified, and the new arrangements for (largely free) post-primary education would allow them to flourish in the new selective grammar schools. The system quickly took on the character of a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the assumptions upon which it was based became operating principles that themselves justified the starting assumptions. Thus, for example, an official report on secondary education in 1955 declared that ‘the great majority of pupils at secondary intermediate schools probably are not intellectually equipped to pass any worthwhile examination’,² and when pupils in grammar schools passed public examinations and those in secondary schools did not, this was taken as evidence that the prior assumptions on ability were valid.

¹ Donald H. Akenson, *Education and enmity: the control of schooling in Northern Ireland, 1920–1950* (London, 1973), 191.

² Gareth Mulvenna, ‘The Protestant working class in Belfast: education and civic erosion: an alternative analysis’, *Irish Studies Review* 20 (4) (2012), 427–46: 431.

Through the 1960s and 1970s the meritocratic claims of academic selection were being refuted by research evidence and, across large parts of Europe, the use of early institutional differentiation was being abandoned. Anne Sutherland provides the most comprehensive account of the research into academic selection up to that point, suggesting that the various selection tests used were socially biased, both in terms of the grade outcomes and the greater capacity of parents from affluent backgrounds to gain grammar places for their children.³

Following the election of the first Blair government, the Department of Education in Northern Ireland commissioned research into the effects of academic selection,⁴ and the first minister of education in the new devolved government, Martin McGuinness, established the Post-Primary Review Group to review the evidence, consult widely and bring forward recommendations. The Burns Report (2001)⁵ was followed by reports on a consultation on its recommendations, the Costello Report (2004)⁶ and a further series of consultation reports. Draft legislation was proposed in 2005, which included a clause to ban academic selection but this became an issue at the St Andrew's Talks aimed at restoring devolved government. The DUP won a concession that the ban on academic selection would be subject to the approval of the NI Assembly, but only if the Assembly was restored, and they knew they could use the 'consensus' rules on voting to block the ban. Once the Assembly was restored, the new Sinn Féin minister of education ended the official 11+ tests, but two unofficial and unregulated test systems were put into place and continue to operate to the present day.

Brown and colleagues do a sterling job in examining the outcomes of recent research on the effects and consequences of academic selection. Additionally, they report the results of interviews with teachers across all school types. What they find is, in some respects, unremarkable: the selection system remains socially biased; it continues to distort the curriculum of primary schools; it leads to high variance in educational outcomes in the population;

³ Anne E. Sutherland, 'Selection in Northern Ireland: from 1947 Act to 1989 Order', *Research Papers in Education* 5 (1) (1990), 29–48.

⁴ Tony Gallagher and Alan Smith, *The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland: Main Report* (Bangor, Department of Education; 2000).

⁵ *Report of the Review Body on Post-Primary Education* [Burns Report] (Northern Ireland, Department of Education; 2001).

⁶ *Future Post Primary Arrangements in Northern Ireland* [Costello Report] (Northern Ireland: Department of Education, 2004).

it encourages a narrow focus on qualifications, as if this is the only important priority for education; and those who benefit from the system want to retain it, while those who do not benefit want to change it.

There are occasional sounds of an attempted revival of grammar schools in some parts of England, but the two Conservative Party leaders who have gone into General Elections with a promise to expand grammar schools—John Major in 1997 and Theresa May in 2017—were both eviscerated at the polls. Furthermore, in addition to the largely UK-based evidence considered by Brown *et al.*, analysis from international comparative data through the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) confirms that early institutional differentiation of pupils is detrimental to overall educational outcomes.

In other words, after well over a half century of research and debate, the evidentiary case against academic selection seems clear. The separation of young people into different categories of school at age 10 or 11 years, on the basis of psychological theories that were prevalent in the 1930s, is educationally redundant. The question is no longer about where the evidence stands, but rather why it is that such an archaic system remains in place in Northern Ireland. Is it a consequence of shockingly shallow political discourse in which a focus on Manichean identity politics renders in-depth policy analysis virtually absent? Is it a consequence of the influence of affluent elites who seek to maintain access to a pattern of privilege in a parochial form of John Galbraith's 'culture of contentment'?⁷ Or is it a more indirect response to change in which unionists cling on to outmoded institutional arrangements because so many of the things they have held dear have been eroded or removed? This issue of policy paralysis seems now to be the most interesting area for exploration.

⁷ John K. Galbraith, *The culture of contentment* (Boston, 1992).