

But he doubts the state system is good enough to survive without independents

In a perfect world there would be “no need for independent schools”, the headmaster of Eton said at a conference of leading headteachers last week. Anthony Little, head of arguably the most famous public school in the world, said that a completely state-run school system was what everyone would “wish for”. But speaking at the 100 Group conference in east London, a gathering of the top 100 state and independent heads, Mr Little admitted that he had little “faith” that the country could do without independent schools. “In the world we all wish for there would be no need for the independent schools system, it would all be state run,” he said. “But I don’t have the faith (with all due respect to) any government in power that could create an environment where we could do without the independent school sector.” Mr Little, who came from a working class family but attended Eton thanks to an assisted place, was speaking at the conference themed around social mobility.

When asked whether education supports social mobility, the Eton headmaster replied: “Absolutely not. We have a very long way to go - I think there is a huge disparity in social mobility. “We have a dialogue that’s very aware, but we have to give opportunities across the board - we have yet to live up to what we want to be achieving.” Mr Little called on any future government to focus on areas such as why girls do better academically than boys, and questioned the curbing of competition in the

state sector. He said: “One area we need to look at is why girls are outperforming boys. There is genuine work to be done around how we help boys be themselves. “I think there is also an issue where in some schools competition seems to be dampened. There is a lot more that we can do, but at the moment I don’t think education supports social mobility.”

Andrew Grant, chairman of the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference, disagreed. Mr Grant said: “I would say my perfect world would be one where every school was an independent school, as it is the Government who pose threats to schools. The opposite of independent is dependent, and state schools are dependent on the Government for funding, which pulls many other levers. “They must toe the Government line, which causes compromises. It’s dependency that needs to go.”

Mr Little’s comments followed earlier claims by another leading independent head Barnaby Lenon, head of Harrow School, who said the Government must avoid “dumbing down” in its attempt to tackle problems around social mobility. Mr Lenon claimed poorer children were being deceived into taking “worthless qualifications” that fail to provide them with the necessary skills in later life, describing them as being akin to “citizens of Weimar, Germany, or Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe carrying their certificates around in a wheelbarrow”. He said: “If we want the brightest children from our

poorest homes to fulfil their potential we must not deceive them with high grades in soft subjects or allow them to believe that going to any old university to read any subject is going to be the path to prosperity, because it’s not.”

In good company

The 100 Group is a collection of the 50 leading state school heads and 50 independent school heads selected in discussion between Schools Secretary Ed Balls, headmaster of Brighton College Richard Cairns, and Joan Deslandes, head of Kingsford Community School, where the event was staged. The heads were chosen on the basis of their standing in their sectors, their commitment to furthering co-operation between the independent and state sectors and their public contributions to the education debate.

Upwardly mobile

The comments of Tony Little came just days after the Government gave tentative backing to former health secretary Alan Milburn’s report on social mobility. Despite claims that the Government had accepted the vast majority of the report’s findings, a host of recommendations were shelved, such as parental vouchers for failing schools. In response, a Department for Children, Schools and Families spokesperson said: “In the response to Alan Milburn’s report on access to the professions, the Government set out a clear plan to promote the aspirations of all young people and increase social mobility.”

Telegraph

Middle-class pupils 'left behind' by Labour

Labour’s education policies are undermining Britain’s “aspirational middle-classes”, according to a leading headmaster.

The threat of “quotas” to dictate admission to leading universities risks blocking the chances of hard-working children from relatively wealthy homes, said Richard Cairns, head of fee-paying Brighton College. He called for the brightest working-class pupils to be given “elite” training – outside ordinary state comprehensives – to allow them to progress at the speed often reached by more affluent peers.

Speaking before a conference in east London on Friday, Mr Cairns said: “India and China have a middle-class that seems to have doubled in size over the last 10 years, yet here we have a political system that seeks to reduce and diminish the ambitions of children born into middle-class homes in an attempt to raise the aspirations of the working-classes.” The comments were made as independent and state school heads prepared to attend a conference on the issue of social mobility. The event – at Kingsford Community School, Beckton – is being staged by a coalition of schools set up to promote greater co-operation between the sectors.

The move comes just days after the Government published its formal response to a report from Alan Milburn, the former Cabinet minis-

ter, designed to boost social mobility in England. New incentives will be created to help the working-classes gain access to top jobs in professions such as law, banking and the civil service, it said. Universities should consider whether teenagers come from deprived families or under-performing schools during the admissions process, the report added, potentially leading to a drop in pupils recruited from schools with the best results. And the Government’s response also hinted that middle-class students could face higher university tuition fees if Labour remained in power after the General Election.

Mr Cairns said: “We do need to raise working-class aspirations but at the same time we need to celebrate the success of middle-class children and celebrate that fact that we have so many parents out there spending their time instilling the necessary soft skills and values and in their sons and daughters that they need to do well in life. “The Government seems to think that the only way to raise aspirations in the working-class is to have all sorts of quota systems that, in turn, damage the middle-class children. That’s muddle-headed. “There are only 12,000 places at Oxford. Instead of find-

ing more extravagant ways to engineer admissions we should be expanding our best universities and raising the aspirations of all pupils to get into them on merit.”

Currently, Brighton College provides free sixth-form places to bright pupils from Kingsford. Five are currently at the fee-paying school and another three have already been through the scholarship programme. Mr Cairns said bright students from state schools should be encouraged to study tougher subjects at the age of 14 as a direct passage to A-levels and university. Instead, many pupils were being put onto practical courses worth up to four C-grade GCSEs to boost schools’ positions in league tables, he said. It follows the disclosure last week that a practical computing course for 14- to 16-year-olds had seen a seven-fold rise in entries in just two years, despite claims from Ofsted that it was of “doubtful value”. Mr Cairns said: “We have to take the brightest pupils out of that environment and allow them to learn at their own pace. “If you were talking about football you wouldn’t hesitate in taking the very best out and putting them in an elite academy, yet we are terrified of doing the same thing for bright working-class children.”