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Speech

Britain, the great meritocracy: Prime Minister's speech

From:
[Department for Education, Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, and The Rt Hon Theresa May MP](#)

Part of:
[Young people](#), [Social mobility](#), [Further education and training](#), and [Academies and free schools](#)

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Theresa May explained her vision for a truly meritocratic Britain and reforms that will ensure there is a good school place for every child.



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When I stood in Downing Street as Prime Minister for the first time this summer, I set out [my mission to build a country that works for everyone](#). Today I want to talk a little more about what that means and lay out my vision for a truly meritocratic Britain that puts the interests of ordinary, working class people first.

We are facing a moment of great change as a nation. As we leave the European Union, we must define an ambitious new role for ourselves in the world. That involves asking ourselves what kind of country we want to be: a confident, global trading nation that continues to play its full part on the world stage.

But at the same time, I believe we have a precious opportunity to step back and ask some searching questions about what kind of country we want to be here at home too.

In fact, it's not just an opportunity, but a duty. Because one thing is clear. When the British people voted in the referendum, they did not just choose to leave the European Union. They were also expressing a far more profound sense of frustration about aspects of life in Britain and the way in which politics and politicians have failed to respond to their concerns.

Some voted for the first time in more than 30 years. Some for the first time ever. And they were inspired to do so because they saw a chance to reject the politics of 'business as usual' and to demand real, profound change.

Fed up with being ignored or told that their priorities were somehow invalid, based on ignorance and misunderstanding, or even on occasion that they were simply wrong to voice the concerns that they did,

they took their opportunity to send a very clear message: they will not be ignored anymore.

They want to take back control of the things that matter in their lives. They want a government that listens, understands and is on their side. They want change. And this government is going to deliver it.

Everything we do will be driven, not by the interests of the privileged few. Not by those with the loudest voices, the special interests, the greatest wealth or the access to influence. This government's priorities are those of ordinary, working class people. People for whom life sometimes can be a struggle, but who get on with things without complaint.

They get on with their jobs – sometimes 2 or even 3 of them – because they have families to feed and support, bills to pay and because to work for a fair reward is the right thing to do.

They get on with their lives quietly, going about their business, going out to work, raising families, helping neighbours, making their communities what they are.

They don't ask for much, but they want to know that the people that make the big decisions are on their side, working for them. They want to believe that everyone plays by the same rules and things are fair.

And above all they want to believe that if they uphold their end of the deal – they do the right thing, they work hard, they pay their taxes – then tomorrow will be better than today and their children will have a fair chance in life, the chance to go as far as their talents will take them.

These are not outrageous demands or ridiculous desires, but for too many of these people today life does not seem fair. They are the people who made real sacrifices after the financial crash in 2008, though they were in no way responsible.

They wonder if others – some of whom really do bear responsibility for the crash – did the same.

More than anything else, they worry – truly worry – that the changing world around them means that their children and grandchildren won't have the same opportunities they have enjoyed in life.

They deserve a better deal.

And to give them that, we should take this opportunity to step back and pose a fundamental question: what kind of country – what kind of society - do we want to be?

I am clear about the answer.

I want Britain to be the world's great meritocracy – a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow.

I want us to be a country where everyone plays by the same rules; where ordinary, working class people have more control over their lives and the chance to share fairly in the prosperity of the nation.

And I want Britain to be a place where advantage is based on merit not privilege; where it's your talent and hard work that matter, not where you were born, who your parents are or what your accent sounds like.

Let us not underestimate what it will take to create that great meritocracy. It means taking on some big challenges, tackling some vested interests. Overcoming barriers that have been constructed over many years.

It means not being afraid to think differently about what disadvantage means, who we want to help and

how we can help them. Because where once we reached for simple ways of labelling people disadvantaged and were quick to pose simple – and often fairly blunt – solutions, in these modern times disadvantage is much more complex.

It's often hidden and less easy to identify. It's caused by factors that are more indirect and tougher to tackle than ever before.

But tackle it we must if we are to give ordinary, working class people the better deal they deserve.

It means marking a significant shift in the way that government works in Britain too. Because government and politicians have for years talked the language of social justice – where we help the very poorest – and social mobility – where we help the brightest among the poor.

But to make Britain a great meritocracy, we must move beyond this agenda and deliver real [social reform](#) across every layer of society so that those whom the system would currently miss – those just above the threshold for help today yet those who are by no means rich or well off – are given the help they need.

It means putting government firmly on the side of not only the poorest in our society, important though that is and will remain, but also of those in Britain who are working hard but just about managing. It means helping to make their lives a little easier; giving them greater control over the issues they care about the most.

This is the change we need. It will mean changing some of the philosophy underpinning how government thinks and acts. It will mean recalibrating how we approach policy development to ensure that everything we do as government helps to give a fair chance to those who are just getting by – while still helping those who are even more disadvantaged.

I don't pretend this change will be easy – change rarely is – but this is the change we need if we are to make Britain the great meritocracy I want it to be.

Over the coming weeks and months the government will set out an ambitious programme of economic and social reform that will help us make this change and build a true meritocracy in our country.

But there is no more important place to start than education. Because if the central concern ordinary working class people have is that their children will not enjoy the same opportunities they have had in life, we need to ensure that there is a good school place for every child, and education provision that caters to the individual needs and abilities of every pupil.

Schools that work for everyone

We start from a position of strength. This government has a proud record of school reform. We have opened up the system, introducing a real diversity of provision. We have schools where teachers and headteachers are free to make the decisions that are best for them.

And through successful policies such as a renewed focus on learning the basics of reading in primary schools, and initiatives to help young people pursue a strong academic core of subjects at secondary level, we are ensuring that every child has the opportunity to develop the core knowledge that underpins everything else.

We have put control in the hands of parents and headteachers, and encouraged people from all walks of life who are passionate about education to bring their best ideas and innovations to our school system.

The [Academies and Free Schools movement](#) overseen by pioneers such as Andrew Adonis and Michael Gove has been a huge success and begun to build an education system fit for the future.

As a result, there are more good or outstanding schools today than ever before in our country. And there are now [more than 1.4 million more pupils in schools rated good or outstanding than in 2010](#).

Our curriculum reforms mean that the proportion of pupils taking core academic subjects at GCSE is up by almost 4-fifths. We are driving up school standards to match the best international comparisons, with a record number of pupils securing a place at one of our world-class universities this summer. We can be proud of these achievements but there is still a long way to go.

Because for too many children, a good school remains out of reach. There are still 1.25 million attending primary and secondary schools in England which are rated by Ofsted as requiring improvement or inadequate. If schools across the north and Midlands had the same average standards as those in the south, nearly 200,000 more children would be attending good schools.

Let's be honest about what these statistics mean.

They mean that for far too many children in Britain, the chance they have in life is determined by where they live or how much money their parents have.

And they mean that for far too many ordinary working class people, no matter how hard they work, how many hours they put in or how many sacrifices they make, they cannot be confident that their children will get the chances they deserve.

For when you are working 2 jobs and struggling to make ends meet, it is no good being told that you can choose a better school for your children if you move to a different area or pay to go private. Those aren't choices that you can make. And they are not choices that you should have to make.

So we need to go further, building on and extending our reforms so that we can truly say that there will be a good school place for every child, and one that caters to their individual needs.

But as we do it, we also need to change our philosophy and approach, because at the moment the school system works if you're well off and can buy your way into the school you want, and it provides extra help and support if you're from a disadvantaged family.

If you're eligible for free school meals, and your parents earn less than £16,000 a year, then there is extra help on offer. That is good and right – and as long as I am Prime Minister, the [pupil premium](#) for the poorest children will remain.

But the free school meals measure only captures a relatively small number of pupils, whose parents are on income-related benefits.

If we are going to make the change we need and build a great meritocracy in Britain, we need to broaden our perspective and do more for the hidden disadvantaged: children whose parents are on modest incomes, who do not qualify for such benefits but who are, nevertheless, still only just getting by.

If you're earning 19, 20, 21 thousand pounds a year, you're not rich. You're not well off. And you should know you have our support too.

At the moment there is no way to differentiate between the school experience of children from these

families and those from the wealthiest 10%.

Policy has been skewed by the focus only on those in receipt of free school meals, when the reality is that there are thousands of children from ordinary working class families who are being let down by the lack of available good school places.

Putting this right means finding a way to identify these children and measuring their attainment and progress within the school system. That work is underway and is central to my vision of a school system that truly works for everyone.

But we must also deliver a radical increase in the capacity of the school system so that these families can be sure of their children getting good school places.

And this is really important. Because I don't just want to see more school places but more good school places. And I don't just want to see more new schools, but more good new schools that each in their way contribute to a diversity of provision that caters to the needs and abilities of each individual child, whoever they are and wherever they are from.

Every child should be given the opportunity to develop the crucial academic core. And thanks to our reforms that is increasingly the case. But people understand that every child is different too, with different talents, different interests, different dreams. To help them realise their potential and achieve those dreams we need a school system with the capacity and capability to respond to what they need.

School capacity

So as we radically expand the number of good school places available to all families – not just those who can afford to buy an expensive house, pay for an expensive private school, or fund the extra tuition their child needs to succeed – I want to encourage more people, schools and institutions with something to offer to come forward and help.

In the last 6 years, we have seen individuals and communities put staggering amounts of time and effort into setting up good new schools. Some of the best state schools, charities, universities, private schools, and businesses have stepped forward to get involved.

And, increasingly, the best state schools are sponsoring the least good. This has been a revolution in our schools system.

But with 1.25 million children still attending schools that are struggling, we need to do much more to increase the capacity of the system so every child can get the education they deserve.

So let's now build on the success of school reform, let's encourage others to play their part, and let's remove the barriers they face so we can do more.

Let's sweep away those barriers and encourage more people to join us in the task of delivering a good school place for every child.

Let's build a truly dynamic school system where schools and institutions learn from one another, support one another and help one another.

Let's offer a diverse range of good schools that ensure the individual talents and abilities of every child are catered for.

That is my ambition.

And there are 4 specific proposals I want to talk about today that I believe will help.

Universities

Firstly, I want to build on the success we have already experienced when some of our great universities have stepped in to help by sponsoring or supporting a local school.

Universities have a huge amount to offer England's schools. They have been part of the fabric of our education system since the 13th century and have had a profound impact on our schools over generations.

Recently we have seen The University of Cambridge establish The University of Cambridge Primary School and The University of Birmingham open an impressive new free school for secondary school pupils and sixth formers.

The new specialist Sixth Form, King's College London Mathematics School, is already performing impressively and the University of Brighton is involved in sponsoring more than a dozen different primary and secondary schools.

These are the kinds of innovation I want to encourage. This kind of active engagement in building the capacity of our school system is in my view far more effective than spending huge sums on bursaries and other financial support that tackle the symptoms but not the cause.

The right for a university to charge the higher level of tuition fee has always been dependent on their ability to fulfil specified access requirements. And this year, in fulfilling these requirements, they are expected to spend over £400 million on bursaries and other forms of financial support for students.

Yet the evidence is clear: it is the attainment of pupils at school that is the over-riding factor in predicting access to university.

I am not saying there is no place for bursaries. But overall, I do think the balance has tilted too far. We need to go to the root of the problem, which is that there are not enough students from disadvantaged backgrounds and from ordinary families fulfilling their potential with the grades to get into the best universities.

So I want our universities to do more to help us to improve the quality of schools so that more students of all backgrounds have the grades, the subjects, and the confidence, to apply to top universities and to be successful in their exams in the first place.

So the government will reform university fair access requirements and say that universities should actively strengthen state school attainment – by sponsoring a state school or setting up a new free school. And over time we will extend this to the sponsorship or establishment of more than one school, so that in the future we see our universities sponsoring thriving school chains in every town and city in the country.

Faith schools

Second, I want to remove the obstacles that stop more good faith schools from opening.

Britain has a long history of faith schools delivering outstanding education. They already account for

around a third of all mainstream schools in England. They are popular with parents and significantly more likely than other schools to be rated by Ofsted as good or outstanding.

I believe we should confidently promote them and the role they play in a diverse school system.

Yet for Catholic schools in particular there are barriers in their way. When a faith-designated free school is oversubscribed, it must limit the number of pupils it selects on the basis of faith to 50%.

The intention is to improve the diversity of the school's intake but in practice it has little impact on many Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu schools because they tend not to appeal to parents of other faiths.

So despite the best intentions, the rule is failing in its objective to promote integration. But it does prevent new Catholic schools opening, because the Catholic Church believes it contravenes its own rules for a Catholic bishop not to prioritise the admission of Catholic pupils.

This is especially frustrating because existing Catholic schools are more ethnically diverse than other faith schools, more likely to be located in deprived communities, more likely to be rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, and there is growing demand for them.

So we will remove this 50% rule to allow the growth in capacity that Catholic schools can offer. Instead we will consult on a new set of much more effective requirements to ensure that faith schools are properly inclusive and make sure their pupils mix with children of other faiths and backgrounds.

Of course, there must be strict and properly enforced rules to ensure that every new faith school operates in a way that supports British values. And we should explore new ways of using the school system to promote greater integration within our society generally.

We will encourage the grouping together of mono-racial and mono-religious schools within wider multi-racial and multi-religious trusts. This will make it easier for children from different backgrounds in more divided communities to mix between schools, while respecting religious differences.

We will explore ways in which schools can enter into twinning arrangements with other schools not of their faith, through sharing lessons or joint extra-curricular activities to bring young people from different schools together.

And we will consult on the idea of placing an independent member or director who is of a different faith or no faith at all on the governing body of new faith schools.

We will also explore new requirements for new faith schools to prove that parents of other faiths would be happy to send their children to the school through a proper process of consultation.

But fundamentally I believe it is wrong to deny families the opportunity to send their children to a school that reflects their religious values if that's what they choose. And it's right to encourage faith communities – especially those with a proven record of success, like the Catholics – to play their full part in building the capacity of our schools.

Independent schools

Third, I want to encourage some of our biggest independent schools to bring their knowledge, expertise and resources to bear to help improve the quality and capacity of schools for those who cannot afford to pay.

This is entirely in keeping with the ethos that lies at the heart of many of these institutions. Most of the major public schools started out as the route by which poor boys could reach the professions. The nature of their intake may have changed today – indeed these schools have become more and more divorced from normal life.

Between 2010 and 2015 their fees rose 4 times faster than average earnings growth, while the percentage of their pupils who come from overseas has gone up by 33% since 2008. But I know that their commitment to giving something back to the wider community remains.

These are great schools with a lot to offer and I certainly don't believe you solve the divide between the rich and the rest by abolishing or demolishing them. You do it by extending their reach and asking them to do more as a condition of their privileged position to help all children.

Through their charitable status, private schools collectively reduce their tax bills by millions every year. And I want to consult on how we can amend [Charity Commission guidance for independent schools](#) to enact a tougher test on the amount of public benefit required to maintain charitable status.

It's important to state that this will be proportionate to the size and scale of the school in question. Not every school is an Eton or a Harrow. Many public schools are nowhere near that size.

Smaller independent schools who do not have the capacity to take on full sponsorship of a local state school will be asked to provide more limited help such as direct school-to-school support where appropriate. This could include supporting teaching in minority subjects such as further maths or classics, which state schools often struggle to make viable. It could include ensuring their senior leaders become directors of multi-academy trusts; providing greater access to their facilities and providing sixth-form scholarships to a proportion of pupils in year 11 at each local school.

But for those with the capacity and capability, we will ask them to go further and actually sponsor or set up a new government-funded school in the state sector and take responsibility for running it and ensuring its success.

Alternatively, we will ask them to fund a number of places at their own school themselves for those from modest backgrounds who cannot afford to pay the fees.

We know this can work. For example, Westminster School is the key partner in sponsoring Harris Westminster Sixth Form, where students at the free school share the facilities and teaching expertise of Westminster School.

In my own constituency, Eton College sponsors Holyport College, offering Holyport pupils access to its sports facilities and the chance to join its educational activities.

And before it became a state-funded academy, Belvedere School in Liverpool worked with the Sutton Trust to create an Open Access Scheme where places were awarded purely on the basis of academic merit, and parents were then asked to pay on a sliding scale of fees fairly tailored according to their means.

I want all independent schools with the appropriate capacity and capability to take these kinds of steps.

I want them to play a major role in creating more good school places for children from ordinary working families; because this government is about a Britain that works for everyone – not just a privileged few.

Selective schools

There is one final area where we have placed obstacles in the way of good new schools – obstacles that I believe we need to take away.

The debate over selective schools has raged for years. But the only place it has got us to is a place where selection exists if you're wealthy – if you can afford to go private – but doesn't exist if you're not. We are effectively saying to poorer and some of the most disadvantaged children in our country that they can't have the kind of education their richer counterparts can enjoy.

What is 'just' about that? Where is the meritocracy in a system that advantages the privileged few over the many? How can a meritocratic Britain let this situation stand?

Politicians – many of whom benefited from the very kind of education they now seek to deny to others – have for years put their own dogma and ideology before the interests and concerns of ordinary people. For we know that grammar schools are hugely popular with parents. We know they are good for the pupils that attend them. Indeed, the attainment gap between rich and poor pupils is reduced to almost zero for children in selective schools. And we know that they want to expand.

They provide a stretching education for the most academically able, regardless of their background, and they deliver outstanding results.

In fact, 99% of existing selective schools are rated good or outstanding – and 80% are outstanding, compared with just 20% of state schools overall.

So we help no one – not least those who can't afford to move house or pay for a private education – by saying to parents who want a selective education for their child that we won't let them have it.

There is nothing meritocratic about standing in the way of giving our most academically gifted children the specialist and tailored support that can enable them to fulfil their potential. In a true meritocracy, we should not be apologetic about stretching the most academically able to the very highest standards of excellence.

We already have selection to help achieve this in specialist disciplines like music and sport, giving exceptionally talented young people access to the facilities and training that can help them become world class. I think we should have more of this. But we should also take the same approach to support the most academically gifted too.

Frankly, it is completely illogical to make it illegal to open good new schools. So I want to relax the restrictions that stop selective schools from expanding, that deny parents the right to have a new selective school opened where they want one, and that stop existing non-selective schools to become selective in the right circumstances and where there is demand.

In return, we will ensure that these schools contribute meaningfully to raising outcomes for all pupils in every part of the system.

In practice this could mean taking a proportion of pupils from lower income households, so that selective education is not reserved for those with the means to move into a catchment area or pay for tuition to pass the test.

They could, as a condition of opening a new selective school, be asked to establish a good, new non-selective school. Others may be asked to establish a primary feeder school in an area with a high density

of lower income households to widen access. They might even partner with an existing non-selective school within a multi-academy trust or sponsor a currently underperforming non-selective academy.

But the principle is clear: selective schools have a part to play in helping to expand the capacity of our school system and they have the ability to cater to the individual needs of every child. So the government will make up to £50 million a year available to support the expansion of good or outstanding existing grammars.

Now I know this will be the source of much debate in the consultation over the coming months, so I want to address very directly some of the key arguments made by those who oppose the expansion of grammar schools.

First, there are those who fear this could lead to the return of a binary system, as we had in the past with secondary moderns. But this fear is unfounded: there will be no return to secondary moderns.

As I have set out today, far from a binary system we are supporting the most diverse school system we have ever had in our country.

From free schools sponsored by universities and independent schools, to faith schools and selective schools, the diversity of high quality school provision means we will be able to cater properly for the different needs of all pupils and give parents real control over the kind of school they want for their children.

We do not want to see whole new parts of the country where the choice of schools is binary. So we will use the approvals process to prevent that from happening.

Second, there are those who argue that selective schools tend to recruit children from more affluent backgrounds. The problem here is not selective schools per se but rather the way that wealthier families can already dominate access to the schools of their choice through selection by house price. I want to stop that and new grammars can help.

We are going to ask new grammars to demonstrate that they will attract pupils from different backgrounds, for example as I said, by taking a proportion of children from lower income households. And existing grammars will be expected to do more too – by working with local primary schools to help children from more disadvantaged backgrounds to apply.

Third, there are those who argue that grammars don't actually select on ability because wealthy families can pay tutors to help their children get through the tests. This might have been the case in the past with the old 11-plus. But it does not have to be the case today.

While there is no such thing as a tutor-proof test, many selective schools are already employing much smarter tests that assess the true potential of every child. So new grammars will be able to select in a fair and meritocratic way, not on the ability of parents to pay.

Fourth, there are those who worry about the cliff-edge of selection at 11. Some fear it is too early, some fear it is too late. The truth is that it doesn't have to be a cliff-edge at all. This is back in the old mindset of the grammar schools of the past. A modern, meritocratic education system needs to be much more flexible and agile to respond to the needs of every child. So we will demand that new grammars make the most of their freedom to be flexible over how students move between schools, encouraging this to happen at different ages such as 14 and 16 as well as 11.

This means that children who are at a non-selective school sponsored by a grammar might join the grammar for specific subjects or specialisms where they themselves are outstanding – or they might move to the grammar full-time later than aged 11, based on their performance at their current school.

Finally, people get lost in the argument about whether the grammars schools of the 1950s and 60s improved social mobility or not. But I want to focus on the new grammars of the future: those that will be just one element of a truly diverse system which taken as a whole can give every child the support they need to go as far as their talents can take them. And give every parent access to a good school place for their child.

This is the true test of schools that work for everyone. And the true test of a meritocratic society.

The great meritocracy

There has been a lot of speculation in the last few weeks, but as you now know this is not a proposal to go back to a binary model of grammars and secondary moderns but to build on our increasingly diverse schools system. It is not a proposal to go back to the 1950s but to look to the future, and that future I believe is an exciting one.

It is a future in which every child should have access to a good school place. And a future in which Britain's education system shifts decisively to support ordinary working class families.

These families are not asking for the world. They just want to know that their children and grandchildren will enjoy the opportunities they have enjoyed and be given the chance to go as far as their talents will take them. Unhindered by background or circumstance. And by the artificial barriers some want to put in their way.

In a country that works for everyone it doesn't matter where you were born, or how much your parents earn. If you work hard and do the right thing, you will be able to go as far as you can.

I want this country to be a great meritocracy. I want to see more houses built, better productivity so we can have more well-paid jobs, more economic growth not just in the south-east of England but across the whole country to help more people get on.

But more than anything else, I want to see children from ordinary, working class families given the chances their richer contemporaries take for granted. That means we need more great schools.

This is the plan to deliver them and to set Britain on the path to being the great meritocracy of the world.

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