In his article for the *Telegraph* entitled “Rejoice! Theresa May’s grammar schools agenda could deliver true social justice”, Ben Kelly boldly asserts that “there is no better way of addressing entrenched privilege than allowing the establishment of educational institutions that select by ability, not wealth.”

In stark contrast to this is the statement of Marc Smith in *The Huffington Post UK*, which is all the more relevant due to the fact he was a victim of a failed entrance exam into a coveted grammar school at the age of 11: “Grammar schools won’t improve anything. Indeed, it’s more likely that they will widen the differences that already exist and label a whole generation of children as failures. The Prime Minister knows this because the evidence is clear but it would seem that, once again, we have a leader more concerned with currying favour than making a difference.

Clearly then there is a huge discrepancy in opinion between those who believe that grammar schools nurture and encourage elitism and entrenched inequality between the classes and those who would argue passionately that grammar schools in fact offer the exact opposite, namely the opportunity to break through the ceiling of social injustice and climb the ladder of success otherwise reserved for those born with privilege and the happy beneficiaries of nepotism.

Before examining the virtues of each of these stances, it is necessary to review the recent political events that have led to this divergent topic being hotly debated.

**Lifting the ban**

In 1998 Tony Blair introduced a ban on the opening of new grammar schools, but now, it would seem, this 18 year Parliamentary stance is going to be scrapped as part of Theresa May’s
political agenda, and in particular in an effort to make her mantra of the system not just working “for the privileged few” but for everyone, a reality.

This juxtaposes significantly the outlook of her predecessor David Cameron who asserted in 2007 that “parents fundamentally don’t want their children divided into sheep and goats at the age of 11.”

Theresa May’s expected departure from Cameron’s education policy would represent an historic shift. However it is not altogether surprising given the murmurings of discontent and the rumblings of support for the reintroduction of grammar schools within the Tory party. This can be demonstrated by the fact that during a survey of Tory backbenchers in 2014 more than 100 MPs pledged their support for the reintroduction of grammar schools.

The difference of opinion within the Conservative party regarding the party’s stance on grammar schools came to the fore in 2012 when key members of the party Liam Fox and David Davis endorsed ConservativeVoice which campaigned in support for grammar schools. That campaign was formally restarted on Tuesday 26th of July 2016. This re-opening of doors that were categorically kept shut by Cameron is a response to the “tone, style and content of the new Prime Minister’s agenda”, according to Dan Porter, the founder of ConservativeVoice, who says he is “delighted” with the Prime Minister’s stance on social mobility.

It is expected that this policy shift could be formally announced as early as October, at the party’s annual conference.

An anonymous government source recently acted as a mouthpiece for the movement as a whole and for those within the party who support the policy U-turn. This source told the Telegraph that allowing new grammar schools was about “social mobility and making sure that
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people have the opportunity to capitalise on all of their talents”. The source also opined that “if you’re a really bright kid you should have the opportunity to excel as far as your talents take you”.

It is this view that has attracted such fierce opposition.

“Grammar schools entrench inequality” – Angela Rayner, Shadow Secretary of State for Education

Those who are in favour of the reintroduction of new grammar schools in the UK use the rhetoric that it affords children from all backgrounds equal opportunity, providing they are prepared to work for it. However, there is a treasure trove of statistics that say otherwise, and it is this that the opposition base their arguments on.

These are a couple of particularly damming statistics which clearly show that a system which utilises selective schools fails the poorest in society:

- The Sutton Trust found that only 3% of children at grammar schools were on free school meals compared with 20% across the county
- Grammar school entrants on free school meals are outnumbered four to one by privately educated prep school entrants
- A study by Chris Cook of Newsnight found that in Kent and Medway children from a deprived background are far less likely to attend a selective school – as the affluence increases so too does the chance of getting in to a selective school (using the income Deprivation Affecting Children Index)

On the basis of these facts, then it would seem that in actual fact grammar schools are a hindrance to social mobility.
Frances Ryan of *The Guardian* is especially passionate against lifting the ban introduced by Tony Blair. To paraphrase her analysis of the typical Tory outlook, ‘our success is based on how smart we are and how hard we try – we are not the products of our economic heritage’. She argues that Tories seek to save the “diamond in the rough”, lifting them from the cesspit of inequality, smashing through the ceiling so to speak. Tories, in her eyes, regard inequality as a just by product of a just system that doles out success in return for hard work and academic ability, whilst leaving the rest stuck in the mud.

Even Sir Michael Wilshaw, the Ofsted chief, condemns grammar schools as being “stuffed full of middle class kids”.

It is an indefensible truth that grammar schools, in their current format, do not help the least affluent in society in the way that they purport to do. Angela Rayner suggests that the reason for this is that at the age of 11, and therefore the age of selection, the less affluent kids simply do not have access to the same resources as their more affluent counterparts who spend vast amounts on private tutors specifically enlisted to coach them how to pass grammar school entrance exams. Her ideology, then, would be to scrap grammar schools all together and replace them with an aspiration to raise the standards of every child in the country through equal opportunity.

While only briefly touched on in the introduction of this study, nepotism is rife. The importance of ‘who you know’ still plays a huge part in individual success and the existence of elite grammar schools does nothing to prevent this but rather provides an environment within which nepotism is able to thrive.

I’m sure Angela Rayner would agree with the school of thought which suggests that grammar schools, rather than disbanding “the privileged few” actually help to entrench them as exactly that - privileged. Far better then, she advocates, to raise the standards of non-selective schools. Stephen Moss, a successful product of the comprehensive system, writing in the
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*Guardian*, echoes this notion: “Comprehensives can work if they are boundlessly confident and well-funded. In a good comprehensive, you can aim high in subjects at which you are good, go more slowly at those in which you were bad. A comp is a blank canvas in which you can be whatever you want to be. Judging children at 11 is disgraceful”.

“We know that grammar schools make a big contribution to raising standards and increasing social mobility,” - Graham Brady, a Tory MP and chair of the influential 1922 backbench committee

In spite of all the evidence provided in the previous section which is contrary to the notion that grammar schools nourish social mobility, 7 in 10 people want to see the ban lifted according to an ORB poll, and 8 in 10 believe it would increase social mobility.

So why is this?

This side of the argument seems to be based less on statistics but more on a shared ideology that grammar schools do increase social mobility, an ideology that is very well supported.

Much of the criticism for grammar schools is criticism of them in their current state and also in their historic state, but the evidence so far supports a socially progressive form of grammar school that targets the less affluent areas. Perhaps the problem at the moment is not that grammar schools exist at all but rather that there are not enough of them to make them a worthwhile exercise properly engaged with the enhancement of social mobility. Graham Brady has this to say: “We should focus on making them available as widely as people want them and ensuring that entry to them is as fair as possible especially for people from less affluent backgrounds.”
It would be hard to argue then that this new wave of proposed grammar schools are not based upon an ideal of social mobility. In fact it is understood by The Telegraph that campaigners are suggesting that the first twenty new grammar schools are explicitly created in socially deprived and less affluent areas. Palpably demonstrating this desire to provide opportunities for all.

Justine Greening, the Secretary of State for Education, is “open-minded” to this new approach but is wary that any selective educational institutions should not resemble “old-fashioned” grammar schools.

If indeed grammar schools are to be introduced, do not expect to see them unchanged in their reincarnation but instead anticipate vast changes directly aimed at combatting the mantra that they “entrench privilege”. Dan Porter, in an open letter to Mrs May and Mrs Greening wrote: “Not everything about the previous system of grammar schools was desirable. For example, we believe that the testing of a child only at the age of eleven was far too restrictive…Why can’t we open it up at 12, 13, 14, 15 and have this continual opportunity for people to have another go at getting in?”

The stubborn will of Parliament

This entire debate is futile of course, dependent on whether or not Theresa May would actually be able to force the changes through Parliament. Something which seems unlikely at the moment due to the enormous amount of opposition to it.

To her advantage, Theresa May has the least elitist cabinet since the 1940’s, with the least number of privately educated ministers since then. This means that she is less vulnerable to Cameron’s Achilles heel: being accused of elitism. Managing to detach herself and her cabinet from this unwanted label grants her more freedom to manoeuvre on issues such as social mobility.
However, Tim Fallon, leader of the Liberal Democrats has asserted that he “will use everything at [his] disposal to stop this happening.” He has also said that if the Lib Dems and the Labour party unite in their condemnation then they should be able to thwart any attempted lift of the ban.

Matt Pritchard, a Tory MP, has suggested that allowing existing grammar schools to expand rather than creating new ones, could be an acceptable compromise, however time will tell if this is a valid option in reality.

Sean Coughlan of BBC News neatly wrote that “grammar schools are on the fault-line between parents wanting both collective fairness and personal advantage.” It seems clear then that grammar school places are coveted. However at the same time it is also apparent that grammar schools are not champions of social mobility in their current - and past - form and so it seems that a solution lies in either scrapping grammar schools all together, or reforming them to the extent that whatever one’s background, one stands a chance of disrupting the entrenched privilege that is currently enjoyed by so few.