

EDITORIAL

Lies, Exaggerations and Half-truths

Even the Coalition Government's most ardent supporters and defenders would have to admit that Michael Gove has made a less than auspicious start in his job as Education Secretary. No one can doubt his naïve enthusiasm for the privatisation of education in general and for the creation of new types of secondary school in particular; but this dangerous obsession has led him to make a number of wild promises and predictions both before and immediately after the General Election which he has singularly failed to deliver on.

Of course, Gove was already a figure of fun before the Election; but somehow, this didn't seem to matter quite so much when he was only the Shadow Education Secretary. In a brilliant 'demolition job' published in *Education Guardian* on 13 April 2010 ('The story of Gove and a shocking pink tutu'), Phil Beadle observed that Gove likes to present himself to the electorate in general, and to the education community in particular, as 'an extravagantly gifted polymath genius'.

Yet this extraordinarily inflated view of himself takes a hammering every time he opens his mouth. With a rare gift for the risible *non-sequitur*, he has described his proposed Swedish-style 'Free Schools' as 'non-selective grammar schools'. And this would appear to be related to his view that most parents hate anything that strays too far from a grammar school-type curriculum with matching pedagogy – 'most parents would much rather their children have a traditional education, with the children sitting in rows learning the names of the Kings and Queens of England, along with the great works of English literature, proper mental arithmetic and algebra by the age of eleven and modern foreign languages.' To help him in his quest for the perfect curriculum, Gove has enlisted the help of such intellectual giants as Carol Vorderman in the case of maths and Prince Charles in the case of history and civics.

It will be remembered that the Academies Bill had to be rushed through Parliament, with a speed and urgency normally reserved for anti-terrorist legislation, largely because of the vast numbers of schools, particularly secondary schools, which were, we were told, desperately seeking to acquire academy status. Questioned about the propriety of such unseemly haste on the BBC Radio Four *Today* programme on 19 July 2010, Gove told an ill-prepared

Sarah Montague that there was a clear precedent for this in that Blair's New Labour Government had done exactly the same with its first piece of education legislation back in 1997. This was, in fact, misleading, almost to the point of being a lie. The very small Education Bill introduced in May 1997 simply abolished the Conservatives' Assisted Places Scheme, with the money released used to fund reduced class sizes for five-to-seven year-olds. The legislation designed to give effect to the far-reaching proposals in the 1997 White Paper *Excellence in Schools* was introduced into Parliament in December 1997 and did not become law until July 1998.

A press release issued by the Department for Education on 2 June 2010 quoted the Education Secretary as saying that the response to become Academies had been 'overwhelming'. It told us that over 1,100 schools had applied for 'academy freedoms'. And then, in the middle of July, it was revealed that as many as 1,907 primary, secondary and special schools had 'registered an interest' in becoming Academies.

It soon transpired, however, that Gove could be accused of seriously exaggerating the scale of the demand for academy status. It was reported on 30 July that only 153 schools had, in fact, applied to become Academies. The list included 107 secondary schools, of which more than 20 were grammar schools, 44 primary schools and two all-through schools catering for 5-to-19 year-olds. It now emerged that if a school wanted to browse the website to find out more about the implications of opting for academy status, it had to supply its name and address, and this had been interpreted by Department officials as actually 'registering an interest'. Dr Mary Bousted, General Secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, was reported in *The Independent* (30 July 2010) as saying that: 'Interest in becoming an Academy now seems to be rather a damp squib. Surely our education system is too important to be subject to 'acting in haste, but repenting at leisure'. One could argue that Gove had manipulated and exaggerated the figures for his own purposes and that the tactic had misfired.

In the event, only 32 of the Government's new Academies have opened at the start of this Autumn Term (September 2010). Gove usually has the extraordinary ability to turn a crushing defeat into something approaching a resounding victory, but, on this occasion, even he has found it difficult to explain away the lack of support for his pet project. If the desire for academy status was limited to such a small number of schools, how can he justify the decision to steamroller the Academies Bill through Parliament?

There has been a similar story of rejection in the case of Gove's Swedish-style 'Free Schools'. Only 16 such schools have won approval to open in September 2011. It is nevertheless true, of course, that the harm they will do will be out of all proportion to their very small number. With seven of the 16 having faith affiliations, there will be a distinctly religious strand to this first wave of Free Schools. Among those earmarked to open in 2011 will be two Jewish schools in London, a Hindu school in Leicester, a Sikh school in Birmingham and three schools with a Christian ethos. In the light of this unwelcome news, Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of the British Humanist

Association, has expressed concern that the Free School Movement will lead inevitably to wider social divides: 'Since the Government has made only token gestures to limit religious discrimination in the admissions criteria of these new Free Schools, we will see greater segregation and deeper divisions within communities' (quoted in *The Guardian*, 7 September 2010).

It seems clear to many of us that Academies and Free Schools will do irreparable damage to the education system of this country. And we cannot look to the Liberal Democrats who have joined the Coalition Government to curb the privatising zeal of their Conservative colleagues. Nick Clegg has let it be known that he is totally relaxed about the introduction of Free Schools and the acceleration of the Academies Programme. And speaking on the BBC1 *Politics Show* at the start of the Liberal Democrats Party Conference on 19 September 2010, the supposedly left-wing and 'progressive' Liberal Democrat Simon Hughes made it clear that he was quite happy to support Free Schools, 'provided they did not take away too many resources from the state sector', and that he was also quite prepared to support the proposed extension of the Academies Project, 'provided there was still some involvement for local authorities'. It is good to see that leading Liberal Democrats are determined to forge a separate identity for their Party!

It is true that the Party's Conference in September overwhelmingly backed a motion that attacked Free Schools because they risked 'increasing social divisiveness and inequity in a system that is already unfair'. And this vote means that Liberal Democrats are now committed to lobbying against a flagship Tory policy. But nothing changes as far as the implementation of government policy is concerned; and Sarah Teather, a Liberal Democrat education minister, made it clear after the vote that she would continue to support her Government's education programme in all its essential elements.

As I write this Editorial, Michael Gove has just appeared on the Radio Four *Today* programme (20 September 2010) to defend the indefensible. It was put to him by interviewer John Humphrys that the gap between private and state schools was bigger in England than in any other European country and that, as far as the state sector was concerned, the middle classes had effectively 'hi-jacked the best schools'. How could it be justifiable, Humphrys asked, to create yet another layer of 'elite schools' in an already multi-tiered system? Gove replied that Academies did not siphon away resources from the rest of the state sector; they simply showed what could be done with 'brilliant sponsors and brilliant headteachers'. To the argument that something should be done to make the education system in this country more just and equitable, Gove responded by quoting what he said was his favourite Abraham Lincoln dictum: 'you don't make the weak stronger by making the strong weaker'.

Well, it's good to have a justification for Tory education policy, even if it's not one I imagine any *FORUM* reader will find acceptable or appealing.

