
‘Gove Moves in Mysterious Ways His Blunders to Perform’: an epistolary critique (with apologies to William Cowper)

COLIN RICHARDS

ABSTRACT The Coalition Government’s education policies are ripe for criticism and equally ripe for controlled but principled derision. In the letters pages of the *Times Educational Supplement* and, to a lesser extent, *Education Guardian*, Colin Richards has subjected them to a barrage of criticism, some couched as sardonic humour. Here are reproduced a self-edited selection of his published and unpublished letters.

On the DfE

I am concerned that the government is replacing the DCSF by the DfE – hopefully not an acronym for Damaging future Education?
(Published May 2010)

On Academies, Free Schools and Grammar Schools

History is clearly repeating itself as Michael Gove attempts to ram ahead with reforms at break-neck speed. The precedent was set by the Dangerous Dogs Act in 1991. Almost 20 years later, we have the Dangerous Dogmatics Act. *Cave canem* is my advice for any school contemplating academy status.
(Published July 2010)

As a tongue-in-cheek sponsor of a new free school I want to ensure that it meets the criteria laid down in Michael Gove’s address to the Conservative Party Conference. My school would be sited in a DfE building, it would make good

use of what was previously a waste of space and, adapting Michael's own words, 'it would put a great new school at the heart of everything we would do'. It would be a daily reminder to the DfE of its core mission and, to cap (and blazer) it all it would have a Latin tag to encourage aspiring parents to enrol their children. It would be in the very centre of the DfE's operation in Sanctuary Buildings. I propose to call it the Atrium Academy. Any takers?

(Published October 2010)

I disagree with worries expressed about the possible expansion of grammar schools with the new 'freedoms' trumpeted by the Coalition Government. By all means let us support the expansion of grammar schools – to the extent that all schools become grammar schools and all schools have to teach the full range of pupils. We could then call them 'comprehensive' schools and use the new freedoms afforded by Gove to provide Latin-free curricula relevant to the twenty-first century!

(Published November 2010)

On Inspection

When considering the impact of removing inspection from so-called 'outstanding' schools and of sharpening the focus on the remainder an old Inspectorate adage is likely to be pertinent: 'Schools do not do what you expect; they do what you inspect'. Michael Gove may live to regret his exemption clause, as may the pupils and parents in at least some of the schools currently glorying in their purported 'outstanding' status.

(Unpublished June 2010)

Michael Gove wants accountability that is 'sharper, more precise and more intelligent'. However, accountability needs to work both ways – to and from central government. For this to happen an 'intelligent' Department for Education will want to know the effects of its policies, including both warts and unanticipated benefits. To do this it will require intelligence, i.e. first-hand information subjected to independent and informed analysis. Ofsted inspectors won't be able to provide this, focused as they are to be on schools in difficulties.

Gove needs to resurrect a truly independent Her Majesty's Inspectorate who can report to him without fear or favour on what is actually happening in academies, 'free schools' and other state and independent schools. His Conservative predecessors destroyed that organisation in 1992. Will he have the courage, the high-minded principle, as well as the resources, to reverse that ill-fated decision?

(Unpublished June 2010)

The editor of the *TES* asks how we can suitably measure school performance. There is a straightforward, but to some an unwelcome, answer. We cannot. Pupils' conceptual understanding and schools' educational endeavours are

simply not measurable but they are judgeable. This is why a fundamentally revised inspection system focusing on judging teaching and learning is urgently needed – and for all schools, state or independent, ‘free’ or maintained, purportedly ‘outstanding’ or otherwise.
(Unpublished July 2010)

When seeking a new chief inspector to head up Ofsted where should the government be looking for relevant expertise? Somebody from waste management? counter-insurgency? animal welfare? age concern? asylum administration? or funeral direction?
(Published July 2010)

With the appointment of a former Blair aide as the new chair and the continuance in office, for the time being, of the current chief inspector, Ofsted is proving to be a safe haven for New Labour personnel and their near-bankrupt education policies. What other new appointments might we expect? Gordon Brown as director of finance? David Blunkett as customer care manager? Alistair Campbell as the new editor of the Ofsted Newsletter?
(Unpublished February 2011)

Under new proposals parents could trigger an Ofsted inspection by criticising their child’s school on the Inspectorate’s web-site. But that contentious proposal could be taken a stage further. In the interests of even greater accountability and transparency shouldn’t parents also be able to criticise publicly the quality and usefulness of Ofsted’s own inspection of that school and shouldn’t Ofsted be required to respond to those concerns on that web-site?

Or would that be a step too far for an organisation that is dangerously under-accountable?
(Unpublished March 2011)

Among some sensible proposals for changes to the school inspection regime Ofsted in a knee-jerk reaction to political pressure from Nick Gibb is proposing that its inspectors judge pupils’ attainment in reading by the age of six. So presumably we can expect not only nonsense words for year two children in their reading checks but also nonsense words for year two teachers in inspectors’ reports?
(Unpublished March 2011)

On Testing and Examinations

The Government’s obsession with examinations reminded me of a critique levelled in 1911 by Edmund Holmes HMI in his book ‘What is and What Might Be’ – the best possible item to be included in Michael Gove’s in-tray.

Holmes commented ‘In a school which is ridden by the examination incubus, the whole atmosphere is charged with deceit. The teacher’s attempt to

outwit the examiner is deceitful; and the immorality of his action is aggravated by the fact that he makes his pupils partners with him in his fraud'. You can keep the quotation as it is or substitute 'education system' for 'school'. Both remain equally valid, and cautionary, in the Con-Lib era.
(Unpublished May 2010)

On the day the A levels results were released and the annual post-mortem on educational 'standards' began I came across this quote from Isaiah Berlin referring to the views of J.G. Hamann. It makes telling reading for all those who place too much reliance on testing and examinations – whether they be perpetrators or victims.

He was not writing specifically about our examination/testing system but he could have been:

Systems are mere prisons of the spirit, and they lead not only to distortion in the sphere of knowledge, but to the erection of monstrous bureaucratic machines, built in accordance with the rules that ignore the teeming variety of the living world, the untidy and asymmetrical inner lives of men, and crush them into conformity for the sake of some ideological chimera unrelated to the union of spirit and flesh that constitutes the real world.

Examinations may be a necessary evil, but an evil all the same.
(Published August 2010)

Behind its populist title, its splendid rhetoric and the usual welter of proposals-valuable and daft, harmless and dangerous - the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, rests on a fundamental misconception. It equates 'best in the world' with 'highest performance', 'highest performance' with 'highest test/examination results' and 'highest test/examination results' with 'highest quality'. That 'equation' is highly questionable and has been refuted time and again by 170 years of inspection by HMI.
(Unpublished November 2010)

If Michael Gove and the DfE believe that is vitally important to publish information about children's performance even at age five 'in order to help people make informed choices' why do they not make it compulsory for independent schools too?
(Unpublished December 2010)

Michael Gove wants us to learn the real lesson of Sputnik and win the education space race. His analogy fails to recognise that the end-product of that Sputnik-inspired race was arriving at a lifeless, barren, inhospitable moon. Too great an emphasis on test data might successfully lead us to an equal sterile destination.
(Published January 2011)

The Government is proposing that every child will have their cognitive development assessed by the age of two and a half. When will our obsession with assessment end, or begin, or end? But is two and a half too late? Why not assess at birth? Or at conception? Or is that too late? Perhaps we should be assessing potential parents instead?

But we do that already at ages 5, 6, 7, 11, 16, 17, 18. Perhaps we need to insist that only those getting a C grade in English and mathematics at GCSE be allowed to breed at all? Then perhaps assessment at two and a half would not be necessary.

This obsessive madness needs to stop.

(Unpublished March 2011)

On the Curriculum

The teaching profession's concern over possible government control of the curriculum may be as misplaced as Michael Gove's apparent confidence in his legal powers. Neither seems to realize that though the Education Reform Act of 1988 enables the Secretary of State to prescribe the content of the curriculum its clauses explicitly prohibit him from prescribing how the curriculum should be organised (i.e. in terms of subjects, areas of learning, etc.) or how it should be taught. This severely limits his powers of control and is a powerful safeguard of at least a measure of professional autonomy.

Of course Michael Gove may decide to try to get those clauses from primary legislation repealed but he would so at his peril. Not only would he be prejudicing the goodwill of the teaching profession which he needs to secure the faithful implementation of his other policies. Almost certainly he would be putting the allegiance of his Liberal coalition partners under strain and also he would be confronted by a 'rainbow coalition' of MPs of a wide variety of political persuasions (including his own) anxious to confront a further erosion of professional and personal liberties.

(Published June 2010)

Primary heads need not worry that the Lib-Con Government will instigate a fundamental curriculum review. On an informed guess there will be only minor changes to English (yet more emphasis on phonics), to mathematics (more demanding content in years 5 and 6) and possibly to science but a major 'enhancement' of history. Whatever time is left will be 'freed up' for schools to provide other components of a purported 'broad and balanced' curriculum. Such a curriculum supposedly for the early twenty-first century would not be a liberal one but it would be a con.

(Published June 2010)

Some commentators seem to believe that members of the Government's curriculum review will 'get the chance to start again in defining what it is that the nation wants its young people to learn'.

But here's just some of the things their remit forbids them to do:

- they cannot decide whether or not there should be a national curriculum of some kind;
- they cannot decide whether or not that curriculum should apply to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland;
- they cannot decide whether or not that curriculum should be conceived in terms of subjects.
- they cannot decide whether or not the most important subjects are English, mathematics and science.
- they cannot decide whether or not subjects other than the current national curriculum subjects should be considered in any revised curriculum;
- they cannot decide whether or not skills are as important as content.
- they cannot decide whether or not issues of assessment should be considered alongside issues related to the curriculum.

These along with other assumptions which they are not allowed to challenge severely limit the 'degrees of freedom' the curriculum committees will have. Despite the naïve optimism the review has sparked in some quarters 'the world is not really their oyster', though this does not, of course, preclude their production of some pearls of wisdom.

(Unpublished January 2011)

I fear that like many others Robin Alexander may have been misled. Recently he has written that the 'Curriculum Review is being undertaken at the Department for Education by an advisory committee supported by an "expert panel" of senior academics'. However, the letter setting up the review explicitly states that its work 'will be *managed* by the Department for Education' and that the Advisory Committee is to '*guide* the review and *help* to frame recommendations'. Make no mistake. This is a review being undertaken *by* civil servants *with* the help of academics and others. It is not a review being conducted *by* an advisory committee *at* the Department. A lot rests on those small words in italics. This is not the independent fundamental review the English national curriculum needs.

(Published March 2011)

On *not* Building Schools for the Future

When Michael Gove leaves office (sooner rather than later judging from the BSF fiasco) BSF will be his epitaph – Blinkered, Short-Sighted Fanatic or, more likely, Bloody, Silly Fool.

(Unpublished July 2010)

On questioning competence

Surely Chris Woodhead must be wrong if he is still arguing that there are 15000 incompetent teachers. Since he and I have retired the figure must now be 14998.

(Published July 2010)

Primary pupils designing knickers for the queen, as reported in the educational press, raises other mind-boggling possibilities – bloomers for Michael Gove, unmentionables for Nic Gibb, Y fronts for Ed Balls and combinations for David Cameron and Nick Clegg? Or perhaps the emperor's new clothes for the whole motley crew?

(Unpublished August 2010)

Given the slippery, mishandling of so-called initiatives by the current Secretary of State can I offer an alternative beginning to Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky'?

'Twas foolish and the slithy gove

Did mire and stumble in the vague'

(Unpublished January 2011)

What Alice-in-Wonderland logic informs the Secretary of State's recent appointments! Three out of the four members of the new expert panel reviewing the National Curriculum are recognised assessment specialists but with no similarly recognised curriculum expertise. (I suspect the fourth would not profess any either.) In contrast the Bew Inquiry into Key Stage 2 assessment involves a number of practitioners with curriculum expertise but has no assessment specialists in its membership. As the hymn-writer might have said 'Gove moves in mysterious ways his blunders to perform'.

(Unpublished January 2011)

On Arrogance and Self-promotion

With Pecksniff-like hypocrisy Chris Woodhead accuses the *TES* of being 'a populist rag'. But who is the more populist ? Chris Woodhead for using the *TES* to popularise his rants and raves, or the *TES* for agreeing to publish them?

(Published September 2010)

In a book published in 1914 Edmond Holmes, a much respected chief HMI, described the problems of education as 'obscure, subtle and elusive'. He was also modest – describing himself as someone who knows 'enough about education to realise how little is or can be known about it'. What a contrast to the arrogant, 'know-all' posturing of Michael Wilshaw in his talk to the 100 Group of so-called leading state and private school heads.

Will Wilshaw's diatribe, I wonder, be quoted in ten years', let alone a century's, time ? I very much doubt it.

(Published February 2011)

On Golden Ages

Between the first publication of the *Times Educational Supplement* in 1910 and its anniversary a century later the education system has experienced a number of swings of the pendulum or, to use a more accurate analogy, a number of spirals 'upwards', 'downwards' or even 'sideways'. Presumably things were 'wrong' and needed reform in 1910; the same seems to apply in 2010. So perhaps in between at one point we got things 'right' (or almost) ... but when? Can we rewind the tape and start again from that point?

But when exactly was that? Well, presumably at the point where you and I were at our most effective. Why didn't we recognise it at the time? Perhaps we all have our 'golden ages'. But, God forbid, perhaps we could all be deluded! Of course, realistically golden ages never have been and never will be ... – except, that is, for the superb class I think I taught so 'brilliantly' in 19...
(Published September 2010)

On Privilege

No doubt many state school teachers would like to be able to teach 'off piste' (as independent school heads recommend) but are intimidated by the Ofsted/target/league tables culture cogently criticised by the independent sector. But equally when faced by such patronising comments from a massively privileged and protected group they are right to feel 'piste off' (pun intended).
(Unpublished October 2010)

If the Coalition Government was genuinely 'progressive' it would not only be paying a pupil premium to state schools serving disadvantaged communities, it would also be levying a 'negative premium' on independent schools serving the most advantaged and redistributing the monies extracted. But despite the Coalition's rhetoric of 'fairness' and 'we're all in this together' I doubt very much whether Osborne, or the equally privately-educated Cameron and Clegg, ever considered this when they did the final calculations for the comprehensive spending review.
(Unpublished October 2010)

On Teachers

I agree with Bernard Trafford, Head of a leading independent school, that Star Trek-like we 'should stride out boldly and seize the opportunities' supposedly (and hopefully) on offer from the Coalition Government. However, I can't accept his characterisation of state school teachers as battery hens conditioned to passivity during the last two decades. During that period there was certainly a degree of conformity (undue in some cases) but there was also a good deal of underground, creative, educational subversion in the children's best interests. Continuing the analogy, the film *Chicken Run* could have been shot in a good

many state schools. We now need to draw on, and develop, that reserve of subversion. There will, I believe, be plenty of takers leading 'the great escape' from excessive conformity. And they won't all be in the independent or free school sectors.

(Published November 2010)

On Teacher Education

Michael Gove and others may well believe that the study of education theory won't help NQTs to deal with a fractious Year 9 intent on disruption. However, it WILL help all of us deal with a fractious Secretary of State with a Year 9 mentality who is intent on disrupting the state (but not the independent) education system for his own ideological reasons, which are equally theoretical but far more dangerous.

(Published November 2010)

If psychometrics to be used with trainee teachers are such good indicators of those destined for a good career in education shouldn't they be used immediately to select, or in this case de-select, Secretaries and Ministers of State for Education who so desperately need that 'blend of empathy, communication and resilience' which the tests are purported to detect?

(Unpublished January 2010)

On Zany Initiatives

With nonsense phonics for six-year-olds and other daft government initiatives 2011 promises to be both 'zooky' and zany. It will be zonky too as the Government zonks one worthwhile educational initiative after another in order to save money. But with clever joined-up thinking it could link zany with zonky.

Michael Gove wants to impose a phonics-only reading check for six-year-olds despite the widespread opposition also featured in last week's paper. Nick Gibb wants to encourage the teaching of Latin in primary schools. So why not design a simple, cheap reading check which only involves phonically-based nonsense Latin words?

'Simplex and 'vilis' (cheap) as a zany Roman meerkat might have said.
(Published January 2011)

COLIN RICHARDS is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Cumbria and chair of governors of a Cumbrian secondary school not seeking academy status. He has been an honorary professor at the University of Warwick and a visiting professor at the universities of Leicester and Newcastle. As a critic of much (though not all) of government education policy (both New

Colin Richards

Labour and Coalition) he is a frequent contributor to the national press, particular to *Education Journal* and to the *Times Educational Supplement* where he has had two hundred articles or letters published. He treasures the epithet 'an old-fashioned HMI' bestowed by a former Chief Inspector of Schools. *Correspondence:* colin@sparkbridge.freeserve.co.uk