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# Half Way to Hell: what Gove is doing to England's schools

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**ABSTRACT** In this article the author summarises the events of the past five months and assesses the damage being done by the Tory/LibDem coalition government to our schools, to the teachers who work in them, and to the education they provide.

## Introduction

Following the indecisive general election in May 2010, the Tories and Liberal Democrats formed a coalition government with David Cameron as Prime Minister, George Osborne as Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Michael Gove as Secretary of State for Education.

Right from the start, Gove was a man in a hurry. Within two weeks of his appointment he had written to all primary and secondary schools in England inviting them to become academies. His Academies Bill was created in haste and rushed through Parliament, receiving the Royal Assent on 27 July 2010.

This initial burst of activity was a sign of Gove's determination to leave his mark on England's education system. Two years on, how is he doing? The following is a summary of what has happened since the beginning of this year – to our schools, to the teachers who work in them, and to the education they provide.

## The Schools

### *Academies*

Gove may have begun by 'inviting' schools to become academies, but it wasn't long before he was forcing them to do so. As 2012 began, the governors of some of England's 200 'underperforming' primary schools were exploring legal challenges to his right to force conversion on them.

One such school was Downhills Primary School in Haringey, which had been given a 'notice to improve' by Ofsted in January 2010. Although the

school had indeed improved – 61% of its pupils achieved level 4 in both English and maths in 2011, above the Government’s ‘floor standard’ – Ofsted now placed Downhills in special measures, and the head, Leslie Church, resigned. The school’s governors ‘reluctantly accepted’ his resignation and held a ballot of parents: 147 voted against academy status, just 14 voted for it. But it was all to no avail. A month later, the governors were sacked and the management of the school was transferred to an Interim Executive Board appointed by the DfE. As academy chains hovered like vultures over Haringey, all twenty teachers at Downhills – supported by parents – went on strike on 22 May (*Times Educational Supplement*, 13 January, 10 February, 23 March 2012; *The Guardian*, 17 January, 10 February, 11 February, 9 April, 22 May 2012).

League tables published by the DfE showed that 107 secondary schools had failed to reach the minimum standards set by the Coalition and they, too, faced being closed and reopened as academies. But other figures published by the DfE showed that academies were performing less well than were maintained schools. In 2011, 60% of pupils in maintained schools attained five A\* to C grade GCSEs but only 47% did so in the 249 academies. And while 74% of pupils in maintained schools made the progress expected of them in English, only 65% of those in academies did so (*The Guardian*, 26 January, 25 February 2012).

One of the academies with problems was the City of London Academy. In its last year as Islington Green School it had been the most improved school in London. But now, as an academy, its results were worse and the principal announced her resignation. Another was Birkdale Academy in Southport. In 2007, before it became an academy, Ofsted had described it as ‘good with outstanding features’ but as an academy in March 2011 it was placed in special measures (*Times Educational Supplement*, 16 March 2012; *The Guardian*, 10 April 2012).

And these weren’t the only problems.

In 2011-12 academies and free schools were paid more than £26 million for 4700 sixth-form students who were never enrolled (*Times Educational Supplement*, 6 April 2012). The Harris Federation decided not to offer the International Baccalaureate in its chain of academies from September, blaming government funding changes (*Times Educational Supplement*, 13 April 2012). The trust running Durand Academy in Stockwell, a primary school regularly praised by the Government, paid a public relations firm more than £152,000 in 2010-11, partly to ensure positive mentions of the school in Parliament and the press (*The Guardian*, 19 April 2012). The police investigated allegations that Richard Gilliland, chief executive of a Lincolnshire academy chain, had used his official credit card to pay for, among other things, sex games and the refurbishment of a flat (*The Guardian*, 27 April 2012). And 128 academies faced having to repay an average of £118,000 because of another government funding blunder (*Times Educational Supplement*, 4 May 2012).

School meals campaigner Jamie Oliver launched a blistering attack on Gove, claiming that because he had allowed academies to ignore national

standards, some of them were lowering nutrition levels in school meals and profiteering from junk food vending machines. Gove said he trusted the academies to provide 'healthy, balanced meals that meet the current nutritional standards'. But a study by the School Food Trust backed Oliver's claims. It found that nine out of ten academies were selling pupils junk foods which were banned in maintained schools – and making up to £15,000 a year by doing so (*The Observer*, 22 April 2012; *The Guardian*, 27 April, 14 May 2012).

Undaunted, Gove pressed ahead with academisation. His next target was 'underperforming' pupil referral units, which his adviser on behaviour, Charlie Taylor, said should be removed from council control or closed. It was announced that from September Gove would be able to direct 'obstructive councils' to cooperate with 'alternative providers' (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 27 April 2012).

### *Free Schools*

First, the good news. In response to revelations that 'creationist' groups were planning to open free schools across the country, leading scientists, led by Richard Dawkins and David Attenborough, warned of the danger of creationism being presented to children as science. The Government accepted the argument and announced that funding would be withdrawn from any free school teaching theories which ran 'contrary to established scientific and/or historical evidence and explanations' (*The Guardian*, 15 January 2012).

And now the bad.

The DfE had already earmarked half its £1.2bn school building budget to free school vanity projects, so there was not enough left to provide the 2000 extra primary schools which rising pupil numbers indicated would soon be required. In London alone, councils estimated there would be a shortfall of 65,000 places by 2015. Shadow education secretary Stephen Twigg urged Osborne to address this 'urgent crisis' (*The Guardian*, 21 January, 19 March 2012).

A National Union of Teachers (NUT) study cited several examples of free schools opening in areas where there were already surplus places, but Gove refused a freedom of information request to disclose assessments of the impact of free school proposals on nearby schools. NUT leader Christine Blower told the union's annual conference in Torquay that the Government had spent £337.2m on academies and free schools since May 2010; £2.6m had been paid to 27 free school groups between November 2010 and February 2012; five former private schools which had become free schools had received £4.26m; and 19 free schools which opened in September 2011 shared a total of £5m for their 1664 pupils (*The Guardian*, 9 April, 10 April 2012).

Meanwhile, DfE figures showed that 18 of the 24 free schools which opened in 2011 were taking a lower proportion of children on free school meals than neighbouring schools, with St Luke's free school in Camden taking

none at all – the Camden average was almost 40% (*The Guardian*, 23 April 2012).

None of this appeared to worry Gove. He announced that 79 free schools would open in September 2012, even though by April only half of these had found suitable premises (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 13 April 2012). And he had several meetings with News Corporation executives to discuss ‘education reform’ and the possibility of setting up a free school and sponsoring an academy (*The Guardian*, 25 April 2012).

### *Privatisation*

In September 2011 LibDem Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg had vowed: ‘No to running schools for profit, not in our state-funded education sector’. But *The Observer* (29 January 2012) revealed that Gove had allowed a Swedish firm to take over the running of Breckland Middle School in Suffolk on a £21m, 10-year contract; two Swedish companies were hoping to manage chains of between five and ten free schools on a fee-earning basis; Wey Education had told the stock exchange that ‘the deconstruction of the education function within local authorities’ provided opportunities to ‘make a substantial return to investors’; and another firm’s shares prospectus suggested that ‘current teaching methods, allocation of resources, wastage and inefficiencies create [an] opportunity’ to deliver education at a lower cost and provide a financial return.

Former DfE permanent secretary David Bell said he saw ‘no principled objection’ to profit-making companies taking over state schools and believed they would ‘probably’ be allowed to do so eventually. Many Tory MPs were already pressing for school privatisation to be included in the party’s next general election manifesto. And the chief executive of an academy chain in Luton said he was hoping to run academies for profit in the future if the law was changed to allow it (*The Guardian*, 1 February, 19 February, 25 March 2012).

### *Grammar Schools*

The new admissions codes, published in January, stripped parents of their right to object to a school’s expansion plans. Campaigners against academic selection said this would result in a battle for survival as grammar schools expanded to take the most able pupils from neighbouring schools (*The Guardian*, 16 January 2012).

And they were right. Kent County Council announced that Sevenoaks would get a grammar school annexe. The head of the town’s Knole Academy, Mary Boyle, commented: ‘What they are saying about my school, my children, my staff and my governors is unfair. The grammar school parents are saying “the only alternative is Knole Academy and we’re not going there”, when most of them have never even visited’ (*The Guardian*, 31 March 2012).

In High Wycombe, Highcrest Academy, due to open in September as Buckinghamshire's first fully comprehensive secondary school, had been planning to have a fair banding system using the results from the 11 plus test, but the local authority warned against this because 'affluence' was 'probably a stronger factor than ethnicity' in the entrance exam. Highcrest's head, Sheena Moynihan, described the admission as 'unbelievable' (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 20 April 2012).

### *School Buildings*

One of Gove's first actions as education secretary had been to replace Labour's ambitious £5bn Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme with his much smaller Priority School Building Programme. But even this stopgap scheme ran into trouble, and by March it had ground to a halt. It wasn't until late May that 261 out of the 587 schools which had applied were told their bids had been successful. In addition to scrapping BSF, the Government had cut schools' capital spending by 80%, and local authority capital spending by 60%. Meanwhile, a survey by *The Observer* found that 40% of heads believed their school buildings were not 'fit for purpose' (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 9 March 2012; *The Guardian*, 30 April, 24 May 2012).

Camden and Liverpool, which had expected to benefit from BSF, were forced to sell public assets to raise cash for school refurbishment. Camden was hoping to raise £117 million to improve 57 schools and children's centres and build a new primary school, while Liverpool was planning three new schools as part of its £100 million rescue package (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 30 March 2012).

In January, LibDem-controlled Sutton Council was hoping Gove would overturn Labour's 1998 limit on infant class sizes so that it could have bigger classes (*The Guardian*, 5 January 2012); and in March, Gove admitted that plans to reform the school funding system – which schools minister Lord Hill had previously called 'a priority' – had had to be shelved because of the economic climate (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 30 March 2012).

## **The Teachers**

### *Anxiety*

Gove's new year resolution must have been to offend as many teachers (and local councillors) as possible. He began by telling those who were opposed to academies that they were part of the 'bigoted backward bankrupt ideology of a left-wing establishment that perpetuates division and denies opportunity'. He went on to snub the North of England Education Conference and instead visited an academy where he attacked local authorities as 'obstructive', and as 'enemies of promise' who were 'happy with failure'. Conference chairman Mick Waters said there was 'an anxiety in the system, a nervousness about where

education is going and a lack of clarity about policy direction' (*The Guardian*, 4 January 2012; *Times Educational Supplement*, 13 January 2012).

Gove was made aware of the extent of this anxiety when he attended the annual ASCL conference in March. A survey of 1800 school leaders showed that more than a third were so disillusioned with what was happening that they were actively planning to resign. Gove was unrepentant and defiantly told delegates: 'Lest anyone think we have reached a point where we should slacken the pace of reform, let me reassure them – we have to accelerate' (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 30 March 2012).

### *Training*

Gove's policy of having teachers trained in schools, rather than in universities and colleges, benefited from the huge rise in tuition fees. With a one-year PGCE course now costing students £9000, many more were opting for the Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP), on which they could earn more than £20,000. There were already more than 21,000 applicants for just 4400 GTP places for the coming year, while primary PGCE courses had attracted 14.8% fewer candidates than in 2011. The Training and Development Agency for Schools (replaced at Easter by the Teaching Agency) declared that more than 300 PGCE courses were 'potentially unviable' and should be closed. But in May the DfE performed a minor U-turn and reinstated most of the PGCE places it had previously said it wouldn't fund, explaining that the Teacher Supply Model had been 'recalculated' (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 13 January, 20 January, 24 February, 11 May 2012).

### *Pay and Conditions*

*Dismissal.* Gove announced new rules on the dismissal of teachers. From September, performance management and capability proceedings would be streamlined, the three-hour limit on heads' classroom observation time would be removed, and it would be possible to dismiss an incompetent teacher in a term, rather than a year. Heads generally welcomed the changes, but teachers' unions condemned them as 'unnecessary and draconian' and a 'bully's charter' (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 13 January 2012; *The Guardian*, 13 January 2012).

It later became clear that heads would be expected to impose progressively tougher minimum performance levels on staff. Unions representing both heads and teachers warned that the new standards lacked clarity. ASCL general secretary Brian Lightman said, 'It is regrettable that every single school will have to draw up their own interpretation. It could be quite problematic' (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 2 March 2012).

*Pensions.* The University and College Union (UCU) began planning for 'coordinated rolling strike action' in protest at the Government's pension reforms, but the Government pressed ahead and announced that there would be

no more concessions – or even negotiations – and that the pensions deal would be conditional on the ‘cessation of any industrial action’. The NUT and the UCU consulted members about striking on 28 March; the NASUWT had no plans to join the strike but was continuing its work-to-rule campaign; and the ATL, ASCL and NAHT were still consulting members (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 27 January, 16 March 2012).

*Regional pay.* Teachers were already in the middle of a two-year pay freeze and faced a 1% cap on increases for a further two years. They were incensed, therefore, when Osborne signalled his intention to impose regional pay on teachers – the Treasury had already provided evidence to the School Teachers’ Review Body (STRB), which was expected to publish a report in July on how it might be implemented. NUT members were said to be ‘livid’, and NAHT general secretary Russell Hobby said the change would make it more difficult to hire staff in the most challenging areas (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 23 March 2012).

But worse was to come. Gove told the STRB that national pay scales should be abolished altogether so that individual schools could set teachers’ salaries. Christine Blower (NUT) commented: ‘Education is a nationally-delivered service so local pay for a teacher is completely inappropriate. It would reduce teacher mobility, create shortages in areas of lower pay, hit recruitment and retention, and create needless extra expense and bureaucracy for schools. The most disadvantaged parts of the country would be hit by a double whammy of government cuts and lower pay’ (*The Guardian*, 16 May 2012).

*GTC.* The General Teaching Council for England was abolished on 31 March, a victim of the coalition’s ‘bonfire of the quangos’. Set up by the Blair government 10 years earlier, it was supposed to drive up teaching standards and maintain public confidence in the profession. But it was given limited powers and in its decade of existence only 89 teachers faced disciplinary hearings for incompetence. Gove said it had given teachers ‘almost nothing’ and that its successor, the Teaching Agency, would deal with the most serious cases of professional misconduct (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 30 March 2012).

*Performance-related pay.* The Commons Education Select Committee recommended that teachers’ pay should ‘reward those teachers adding the greatest value to pupil performance’. It acknowledged that there were ‘political and practical difficulties with such a model’, but said ‘the comparative impact of an outstanding teacher is so great that hurdles must be overcome’ (CESC, 2012, pp. 4-5).

The proposal for performance-related pay divided the unions. Russell Hobby (NAHT) said that automatic pay rises based on length of service should be scrapped and heads should be free to reward good teachers regardless of their experience. But Christine Blower (NUT) said performance-related pay

would be a disincentive for teachers to work in challenging areas where attainment was lower (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 4 May 2012).

*Annual conferences.* At the annual union conferences Osborne's proposal for regional pay threatened to cause even greater problems for the Government than the pensions issue. The ATL's executive member for pay and conditions, Ralph Surman, said, 'Regional pay could result in a toxic educational landscape that no one wants to work in. It will be a demotivating culture and the notion of individual contracts, which is where we could be heading, would be extremely divisive' (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 6 April 2012).

Delegates at the NUT conference in Torquay voted to continue their campaign against pension reforms and for local strikes and other industrial action in schools that chose to impose tighter monitoring of teachers under the Government's new regulations. They also agreed to mount a campaign of mass resistance to government plans for local pay, which they saw as part of the Government's agenda to fragment and privatise education. One delegate warned that Gove was intent on the 'complete destruction of state education' (*The Guardian*, 7 April, 9 April 2012).

And at the NASUWT conference in Birmingham general secretary Chris Keates berated Gove for his 'unparalleled vicious assault' on teachers, schools and state education. She told the conference that Gove and his ministerial colleagues had 'wrought havoc on our education and other public services'. Teachers were now told 'what to teach, how to teach and when to teach, often by those who have not taught for years'. They were 'monitored to destruction by an army of adults and even the children they teach'. She went on: 'If teachers are to be recruited and retained they need pay levels which recognise and reward them as highly skilled professionals. They need working conditions which enable them to work effectively to raise standards. Savage cuts have been made to education budgets with thousands of jobs lost or at risk. Specialist services on which schools and some of the most vulnerable in our society rely have been reduced or disappeared completely.' Sustainable pension schemes had been 'torn up' and the public fed 'a diet of myths and misinformation'. The only positive thing she could say about Gove was that he was the union's 'new poster boy' – membership had risen sharply since he had become education secretary. She concluded: 'The secretary of state sends his apologies but he has insisted that all ministers take a break over Easter. They have all been working really hard. Demolishing state schools really takes it out of you' (*The Guardian*, 8 April 2012).

Delegates voted to step up their campaign against 'concerted and ideologically driven attacks' on pensions, pay and workload issues, and concerns about the serious threat to state schools from privatisation and 'predatory interests' (*The Guardian*, 9 April 2012).

*Ofsted.* Michael Wilshaw took up his post as head of Ofsted on 1 January and ten days later he warned schools in England that from September they would



face no-notice inspections. Gove 'warmly welcomed' the proposal, but Brian Lightman (ASCL) warned that 'An effective inspection system is based on mutual trust and respect, not the premise that schools are trying to "cheat" and need to be caught out. If it is going to lead to improvement, inspection needs to be done with schools rather than used as a beating stick' (*The Guardian*, 10 January 2012).

A week later Wilshaw had a go at 'coasting schools' when he announced that the 'satisfactory' rating – which Ofsted had given 28% of schools at their last inspection – would be replaced with 'requires improvement' (*The Guardian*, 17 January 2012; *Times Educational Supplement*, 20 January 2012).

Wilshaw's next target was England's one thousand 'outstanding' schools. A quarter of them could be downgraded, he warned, when inspectors started reinspecting them in the autumn. Gove had previously suggested that good schools might be exempt from further regular inspection. Christine Blower (NUT) said Wilshaw's words were 'yet more aggressive rhetoric from a chief inspector who has obviously warmed to the task of attacking the teaching profession from any angle' (*The Guardian*, 9 February 2012; *The Times Educational Supplement*, 10 February 2012).

A month later Wilshaw continued his onslaught by calling on ministers to introduce a tougher English target at the end of primary school. Russell Hobby (NAHT) said, 'People will react with dismay at another attempt to move the goalposts', and ATL general secretary Mary Bousted warned that a greater focus on targets would 'detract from the broad and rich literacy curriculum that is needed to support learning at secondary school' (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 16 March 2012).

Wilshaw's next big idea was to set up regional Ofsted centres to 'help schools to improve'. He told a meeting organised by the right-wing think-tank Policy Exchange: 'We need to get more involved in the whole issue of the brokerage of school improvement services' (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 23 March 2012).

Ofsted itself was not immune from criticism, however. Dylan Wiliam, professor of education at the University of London Institute of Education, told *The Times Educational Supplement* (3 February 2012): 'Ofsted do not know good teaching when they see it'. He urged the organisation to show some humility and integrity by subjecting its school inspections to an evaluation of their reliability and publishing the findings. Short 'snapshot' observations of lessons could not possibly be a reliable measure of the impact teachers had on pupil progress, he warned.

At its annual conference, the NUT said it would consider launching a campaign of 'non-cooperation' with Ofsted, similar to that in Northern Ireland, where teaching unions had implemented boycotts of the Education and Training Inspectorate. Members would not provide the inspectorate with documents or data and would stop teaching if an inspector entered their classroom. Members of the NASUWT were equally hostile at their conference in

Birmingham. One asked: 'Can we boycott Ofsted? If not, why not? If we can, why aren't we doing it?' (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 13 April 2012).

By the start of May, relations between Wilshaw and teachers seemed to have reached a new low. The Ofsted chief told a conference of independent school heads that England's teachers didn't know the meaning of the word 'stress'. They should 'roll up their sleeves and get on with improving their schools', he said. Christine Gilbert, Wilshaw's predecessor, said there was evidence of widespread disillusionment in schools, with morale at 'rock bottom'. Her comments coincided with publication of an NASUWT survey which found that nearly half its members had considered resigning in the past year. And at the NAHT's annual conference, heads accused Wilshaw of using 'bully-boy tactics' to create a culture of fear in schools (*The Guardian*, 10 May 2012; *The Observer*, 12 May 2012).

## Education

### *Curriculum*

*Computing.* The Royal Society's review of the teaching of computing in UK schools concluded that it was 'highly unsatisfactory'. Gove announced that the existing programme of study would be scrapped: new lessons would be designed by industry and universities (*The Guardian*, 13 January 2012).

*Vocational education.* The Government announced that thousands of vocational qualifications – said to be used by some schools to improve their rankings – would be removed from school league tables. Three thousand qualifications would be cut to just 125, and only 70 of these would count towards the main performance measure of five A\* to C grades at GCSE (*The Guardian*, 31 January 2012).

*Drugs education.* Department of Health figures showed that, despite claims by ministers, the government had cut spending on drugs education by 80%. Campaigners said a vital public service was being eroded at a time when it was sorely needed (*The Guardian*, 25 March 2012).

*Early years.* Clare Tickell's review of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) had recommended reducing the number of early learning goals from 69 to 17. In March the Government published its new EYFS, based largely on Tickell's recommendations. Some practitioners warned that the slimming down had gone too far (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 30 March 2012).

*Phonics.* The Government's obsession with teaching reading exclusively by 'systematic phonics' continued unabated. Schools minister Nick Gibb criticised heads and local authorities for not buying more phonics schemes and training from a government-approved catalogue. Only 3211 of the 16,000 primary

schools in England had taken up the offer of matched funding from the DfE to buy the materials (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 3 February 2012).

In a report on the teaching of English, Ofsted said that 'too few schools gave enough thought to ways of encouraging the love of reading' (Ofsted, 2012, p. 6). To many, this sounded like a condemnation of the phonics method. But not to the Government. It's latest wheeze was to punish teacher trainers who didn't enthusiastically embrace it: from September, Ofsted would send emergency inspectors to courses where trainees complained about their phonics training (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 16 March 2012).

*Religion.* In December 2011 the TUC had written to Gove expressing alarm that a homophobic booklet by an American preacher had been distributed in Roman Catholic schools in Lancashire. The TUC asked Gove to extend to the school curriculum the provisions of the 2010 Equality Act, which prohibited discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. Gove refused (*The Guardian*, 18 February 2012).

In March the Church of England set out ambitious plans to increase its influence by opening new schools and providing services to non-religious schools no longer catered for by emasculated local authorities (*Times Educational Supplement*, 23 March 2012). In April the British Humanist Association accused the Government of giving faith schools 'preferential treatment' by allowing them to be established without consideration of bids from non-religious organisations (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 27 April 2012). And in May Gove sent every school a King James Bible, paid for by millionaire Tory party donors (*The Guardian*, 18 January 2012, 15 May 2012).

#### *Examinations*

In a letter to Ofqual, Gove said he wanted universities to determine the content of A level syllabuses and set the exam questions. Universities, head teachers and examiners expressed concern over the plans, claiming that the system was 'not broken' (*The Guardian*, 2, 3 April 2012).

Ofqual claimed that GCSE exams in biology and chemistry and A level exams in biology, chemistry and geography had become easier over the previous decade. In order to curb 'persistent grade inflation', it recommended scrapping the modular AS structure, making some core subjects compulsory, and introducing multiple-choice questions. But not everyone agreed with its analysis. Durham University education professor Robert Coe questioned Ofqual's methodology, describing its reports as 'of limited value' (*The Guardian*, 29 April, 1 May 2012; *The Times Educational Supplement*, 4 May 2012).

'Explain, briefly, why some people are prejudiced against Jews'. A perfectly reasonable exam question for pupils studying the Holocaust? Not according to Gove, who described it as 'bizarre' (*The Guardian*, 25 May 2012).

*Special Needs*

Children's minister Sarah Teather launched a pilot project in which parents of children with special needs in 31 local authorities were given money to spend on the educational support of their choice. One academy head said parents were worried about the complexities of managing a personal budget, which would 'add to their stress and workload when just caring for their own child already exhausts them'. Opposition politicians argued that the initiative would favour middle-class parents and that those who chose not to become involved would be left with 'second-rate' services (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 10 February 2012).

A month later Teather told heads that from September they would have to give precise details of how they spent the 'pupil premium', and the DfE announced that it was taking £50m from the pupil premium fund to pay for its summer schools programme (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 9 March 2012).

*Behaviour*

*Exclusion.* Gove announced that, from September, new rules would make it easier for schools to exclude unruly pupils, but that if a school went ahead with an exclusion against the recommendations of an independent review panel it would face a 'levy' of £4000. Martin Ward (ASCL) said the payment was 'widely seen as a fine on the school and hence on its other students', and the NAHT said the levy would have a disproportionate impact on smaller schools.

Meanwhile, a report by Children's Commissioner Maggie Atkinson found that in the school year 2009-10 more than 600 primary school pupils – including a hundred infants – were excluded from school. She recommended that no infant should be permanently excluded and that there should be a 'presumption against' expelling any child from junior school (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 2 March, 23 March 2012).

*Truancy.* Gove's behaviour adviser, Charlie Taylor, said the fines which head teachers could impose on parents for their children's truancy should be increased from £50 to £60, rising to £120 if the fine was not paid within 28 days, with the money automatically recovered from child benefit (*The Guardian*, 16 April 2012).

*Searches.* The 2011 Education Act had given teachers the right to search students' mobile phones and to delete files. The House of Lords decided to go further. In a debate on the Schools (Specification and Disposal of Articles) Regulations 2012 they passed a motion allowing teachers to search students for tobacco, cigarette papers, fireworks and pornographic images on phones, iPads and laptops (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 30 March 2012).

### *Poverty*

More than 3000 breakfast clubs closed in 2011, as schools struggled with budget cuts while facing increased demand from the children of recession-hit families. Charities said many schools were seeking 'food aid' to keep their breakfast clubs going for the most vulnerable pupils (*The Times Educational Supplement*, 2 March 2012).

And the Children's Society warned that more than half of all children living in poverty – 1.2 million – were not receiving free school meals, and that another 350,000 would lose their free school meals from October 2013 under the Government's welfare reforms (*The Guardian*, 19 April 2012).

### *Higher Education*

Les Ebdon was appointed director of the Office for Fair Access in February. Business secretary Vince Cable's decision to appoint him had been controversial, because Ebdon had said he wanted to impose large fines on universities which did not take enough disadvantaged students and forbid them from charging the maximum fee of £9000 a year. Tory MPs had tried to veto the appointment and Gove was said to have lobbied against it, describing Ebdon as an advocate of social engineering rather than excellence (*The Guardian*, 8 February, 13 February, 17 February, 20 February 2012).

### **Conclusion**

What are we to make of all this? Are there any coherent strands running through this sorry catalogue?

First, there is Gove's enthusiasm for the marketisation of education. This process – begun by Thatcher and furthered by Blair – is now being ruthlessly pursued to its logical conclusions. The education market will determine who runs the schools, and if that means profit-making companies, so be it – Gove has no objection 'in principle' to their involvement. In order to achieve full marketisation, he is destroying the locally administered national service created by the 1944 Education Act – the 'triangular' system of central government, local government and the schools.

So, while Thatcher and Blair denigrated and weakened the local education authorities, Gove is now endeavouring to remove them from the picture altogether. He is certainly succeeding. In April this year the DfE announced that a milestone had been passed – more than half of England's secondary schools had either become academies or had applied to convert (*The Guardian*, 5 April 2012).

But local government has 'a proud history' in relation to education, with some LEAs setting high standards in their 'progressive and child-centred practices'. What's more, these local authorities are 'politically accountable at the ballot box to local ratepayers' (Cunningham, 2012, pp. 109-110). If you take them away, you are left with 'a kind of widespread anarchy' and 'a series of

mini-fiefdoms, controlled by powerful interests, who are permitted to run schools as they see fit. For all their flaws, local councillors, and many school governors, are elected. They can be removed, re-elected, or challenged at any time' (Benn, 2011, p.112).

Perhaps Gove should pause for a moment and consider the extraordinary level of power he is bequeathing to his successors:

When Crosland introduced comprehensives, he had to use persuasion and political skill, alongside the limited powers available to him. He and his Labour successors did not wholly succeed: pockets of grammar schools survived. Under the powers Gove is acquiring, a future Crosland would be under no constraints. His word would be law, his position Napoleonic. Is that the future Gove wants? (Wilby, 2012)

Second, there is an enormous amount of cant. So Gove talks a lot about 'freeing' schools from local authority control, when he knows perfectly well that the local authorities have no powers left from which schools can be 'freed'. He tells teachers they're real professionals doing a grand job, but he never misses an opportunity to dictate exactly what and how they should teach (witness the imposition of 'synthetic phonics' as the only way to teach reading). His appointment of the aggressive Wilshaw as head of Ofsted tells you all you need to know about Gove's real opinion of teachers.

The cant extends to parents and governors, too. Parents are told they are to have more choice, but when they choose not to have an academy foisted on them, they are ignored. When they object to the expansion of a grammar school, they are told they no longer even have the right to object. Governors are expected to exercise great responsibility, yet when they try to do so, they are overruled. So much for Cameron's 'Big Society': it was always a public relations gimmick.

Depriving some of the poorest children of their free school meals while giving tax cuts to the wealthiest in society seems an odd way of demonstrating that 'We're all in this together'. Just another bit of Cameron cant.

Meanwhile, Clegg makes another speech condemning the lack of social mobility in Britain as 'an absolute scandal' (*The Guardian*, 22 May 2012). The real scandal is that Clegg's government is pursuing policies which are actually worsening social mobility – like cutting education spending by 13%.

In the real world, Gove's free schools take half as many pupils on free school meals as average while his academy scheme gives top schools extra money. Every Child a Reader brilliantly rescues six-year-olds from failing to read, but this year 9,000 fewer will get this programme that shoots the deprived ahead permanently. So until ministers' deeds match their words, they would do well to be quiet about social mobility: it only angers those who care. (Toynbee, 2012)

Still, I suppose one shouldn't expect integrity from a man who toured university campuses promising students that LibDems would oppose any increase in tuition fees and then trebled them; who vowed that profit-making companies would not be allowed to run our schools and is part of a government which is doing just that; and whose party's policy of replacing academies with schools accountable to local authorities has been conveniently forgotten.

Third, with grammar schools making a comeback, it's clear that the Government is obsessed with an outmoded and elitist view of education. Gove says he wants to see children 'sitting in rows, learning the kings and queens of England, the great works of literature, proper mental arithmetic, algebra by the age of 11, modern foreign languages. That's the best training for the mind and that's how children will be able to compete' (*The Guardian*, 13 April 2010). His schools minister, Nick Gibb, would certainly agree – one educationist describes him as having 'an unreconstructed 1950s grammar school agenda' (*The Guardian*, 17 May 2010). Meanwhile, Cameron wants state schools to be more like private schools. Pupils, he says, should 'stand up when their teacher walks in the room'; there should be 'real discipline', 'rigorous standards', 'hard subjects' and 'sports where children can learn what it is to succeed and fail' (*The Guardian*, 20 April 2012).

It's hardly surprising that such views prevail in this government. After all, the Cabinet consists largely of ex-public school millionaires who know little of education other than Eton and Harrow. Even one of their own backbenchers has called them 'arrogant posh boys' (*The Guardian*, 23 April 2012). But it's not just that they're wedded to a bizarre view of education. They're also incompetent – witness the countless errors, U-turns and funding blunders. 'This government's blend of incompetence and ideological rigidity would be a fascinating spectacle if we were distant bystanders. The bungling and dogmatism are unrivalled in postwar Britain' (Toynbee, 2012).

Finally – and perhaps most seriously of all – there is the damage being done to democracy itself by a government pursuing right-wing Tory policies for which few – if anyone – voted, propped up by LibDem leaders who mouth sanctimonious claptrap about 'serving the nation' while betraying their party's ideals. The tragedy is that the damage this wretched government is doing – to our schools, to our health service, to the poor, the homeless, the unemployed and the disabled, and to democracy itself – will be difficult, if not impossible, to reverse. We are, truly, half way to hell.

In the Commons recently, Labour leader Ed Miliband declared that 'the nasty party is back' (*The Guardian*, 23 May 2012). He was quite wrong. The nasty party never went away.

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