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## Omnishambles: reactions to the second year of Coalition education policies

COLIN RICHARDS

**ABSTRACT** The UK's Coalition Government completed its second year in office in May 2012. Many of its policies and pronouncements have been divisive and are contributing to the dismantling of the state education system as we have known it. Here, reflecting George Orwell's observation that 'Every joke against the established order is a tiny revolution', Colin Richards, a strong supporter of locally-maintained comprehensive education, subjects them to both criticism and ridicule through a self-edited selection of his published and unpublished letters to national newspapers – his third epistolary critique and one that covers the period May 2011 to April 2012.

### **On 'omnishambles'**

I agree with Ed Milliband that 'omnishambles' is a great word but not just because it sums up the government's recent series of self-inflicted wounds. 'Omni' derives from the Latin for 'all'; a 'shambles' is a butcher's slaughterhouse or a scene of carnage. Thus isn't 'omnishambles' also a great word for summing up the slaughter of all our hopes, at least in the short-term, for a fairer Britain?  
(Unpublished April 2012)

### **On Gove**

How perceptive (deliberate or unconscious?) of one of your editors to write that 'Mr Gove is on the offensive' when talking about whingeing head teachers ... Offensive it certainly is.  
(Published November 2011)

Michael Gove is not the first Secretary of State to have high (unrealistically high?) aspirations. David Blunkett had so over a decade ago when he set primary schools challenging targets in terms of the percentages of children achieving level 4 in mathematics and English. He even promised to resign if the

targets weren't met (though in the event he moved artfully on before the target date). Shouldn't the current Secretary of State make a similar commitment? But then, would that be an incentive, or more likely, a strong disincentive, for primary and secondary schools to raise their game?

(Published June 2011)

Bernhard Rust, Minister of Education in the Hitler regime, would have envied the panoply of powers now possessed by Michael Gove. Doubtless he too would have used them for ideological purposes.

(Unpublished January 2012)

### **On academies**

The cachet 'academy' will soon lose its gloss as some academies falter and the democratic deficit created by weakened or non-existent local authorities becomes clear. As the chair of governors of a secondary school which has twice rejected academy status (and is likely to a third time later this year) I'm nevertheless tempted to try to trade on the cachet while it lasts. I wonder if I dare propose to our beleaguered local authority that the school be renamed 'M\*\*\*\*\* Non-Academy'?

(Unpublished April 2012)

Peter Wilby points to Gove and his fellow ministers as the 'guilty men' fostering the break-up of the state education system. But there are many other guilty men and women – those collaborating head teachers (mainly of secondary schools) who have willed the end of local democratic involvement in education by taking the thirty pieces of silver offered as an inducement to take up academy status.

(Published April 2012)

### **On grammar schools**

With the knowledge of the Department for Education and almost certainly its connivance, there is now a concerted attempt get around the ban on the establishment of new grammar schools in place since 1998 – and to expand selective education. Two grammar schools in Kent are proposing to establish 'satellite schools' on new sites. If successful, no doubt attempts will be made to replicate this move in other parts of the country leading to a lowering of educational standards for the majority of children, many of them from poorer families. Who knows, some grammar schools might choose to establish satellites in previously non-selective areas. We urge Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs to raise the matter. The expansion of selective education by indirect means is too important an issue not to be debated in Parliament.

(Published March 2012)

For those of us who support comprehensive education the importance of Hillcrest Academy's plans is not the admission by the LA of the influence of affluence on selection but the fact that a good secondary modern school has used its academy status to become comprehensive and therefore breach its LA's fully selective system. Let's hope that many other secondary modern academies do the same and thus offer all parents in their area more genuine choice over the type of secondary school their children can attend. Who knows, some of those parents might prefer a 'good' recently established comprehensive academy to a second-rate grammar school resting on its selective laurels.

(Published April 2012)

### **On independent schools**

As a long-time advocate of the abolition of the independent sector and its incorporation into state school provision I am having a total re-think in the light of recent trends. Although I still bridle at references to the 'top flight', to 'public school DNA' and to 'struggling primaries' perhaps, just perhaps, the pattern of educational provision does need to change radically with the government giving the lead.

If all schools are to aspire to 'top flight' status (whatever that means) and if independent school 'DNA' is so superior, why doesn't the government make ALL schools, including 'struggling primaries' and 'top flight' public schools, independent – but funded to the same level, resourced equitably and given parity of esteem?

But we all know why not, don't we? In education as in *Animal Farm*, itself written by a disillusioned public school product, all are equal in this 'big society' but some are more equal than others.

(Unpublished October 2011)

Ministers need to be consistent in their policies. If 'top flight' independent schools are to help struggling primaries, shouldn't 'outstanding' state primaries equally be encouraged to take over struggling prep. or public schools?

(Published October 2011)

Nick Gibb's latest league table initiative applies only to state secondary schools since only these have pupils with test/exam scores at age 11 and at age sixteen. There's a strong element of hypocrisy here. If these comparative tables are so valuable why doesn't the government insist on similar tables (and testing) for all independent schools? Don't Gibb and Gove believe that some of these independent schools need to be 'named and shamed'? Why the 'double standard'? ... but we know why, don't we?

(Unpublished January 2012)

How does Martin Stephen know that 'Education Secretary Michael Gove's reforms will lead to massive improvement in the quality of state education'?

Does being former high master of St Paul's School give him a privileged view of the future to go along with the other privileges he and his former pupils have enjoyed?

(Unpublished April 2012)

### **On free schools**

Following the splendidly irreverent suggestion that Greece should become an academy to solve its debt problems, surely Italy could become a *scuola libera*.

(Published November 2011)

### **On inspection**

As a former inspector and long-standing critic of the Ofsted inspection regime I welcome what the organisation describes as its 'new focus' on 'what matters most: the quality of teaching and learning, backed by excellent leadership and management, and good discipline and behaviour'. However, it unwittingly criticises its own past practice by describing the focus on these aspects as 'new'. Whatever were Ofsted inspectors doing under previous arrangements if they weren't focussing on these issues?

(Published May 2011)

The new chief inspector plans to introduce unannounced inspections and wants his inspectors to see classrooms 'as they really are' presumably to prevent schools 'playing the system' by removing or neutralising recalcitrant pupils before an inspection.

Why has this happened? There has been hypocrisy on the part of both Ofsted and head teachers about this issue. Despite what teachers' leaders may have said, the practice has been quite common, if not widespread, and it has happened, not just in schools where behaviour has been judged satisfactory or worse, but also in those 'outstanding' schools where behaviour has been judged good or better. Paradoxically, it may be some of these latter schools who have been most successful in 'playing the system' and will now be spared from routine no-notice inspections.

The real issue is why so many schools felt that they had to 'play the system'. The answer is that schools have been afraid. They have been afraid that the behaviour of a very small number of pupils could prejudice the findings of their inspection and put them in professional and educational jeopardy. With such a prospect the actions of some schools have been understandable, if regrettable.

Under the strident new chief inspector and with no-notice inspections that fear will increase and so will that awful sense of professional jeopardy.

(Unpublished January 2012)

Given that Ofsted's mission is improvement through inspection the fact that nearly 800 schools visited by inspectors were noted in the Annual Report to have failed to improve since their last inspection must lead to questions being asked about the effectiveness of Ofsted as well that of the schools themselves. However, judging from the remarks made by the acting chief inspector when introducing Ofsted's Annual Report, there is no sign of this happening within the organisation itself. Perhaps Ofsted itself requires 'special measures'? Is the new chief inspector the appropriate person to apply these?

(Published November 2011)

Wilshaw wants his inspectors to report on teachers' 'dress and demeanour'. Presumably adverts like the following may well appear in the professional press:

Wilshaw and co, out-fitters to Her Majesty, can fit you up with protective clothing: blouses whose buttons do not burst open, trousers whose flies cannot unzip, sports bras for the well-endowed, opaque shirts for the hairy-chested, blazers braided back and front and inside and out ... all in grey colours to make you thoroughly inconspicuous.

If so, will there be any takers? ... Hopefully not.

(Unpublished December 2011)

Will no-notice inspections also apply to inspectors? Will they be given no chance to look at performance data before they visit and therefore see schools 'as they really are' and report as they find without having any previous preconceptions? That at least would be an advance on current inspection practice.

(Published January 2012)

I have no doubt that virtually all schools share Michael Wilshaw's aspiration to be good and many would aspire to being even better. Two changes to the Ofsted grading system would help. To reinforce that aspiration and to acknowledge that almost all schools are likely to have some pockets of good practice, 'satisfactory' should be replaced by 'not consistently good'. Similarly 'outstanding', a norm-referenced term which by definition all cannot attain, should be replaced by 'excellent' – which in principle at least is open for all to achieve.

But let us not forget. Improving the grading terms will of itself do little or nothing to improve either the quality of education or the quality of inspection.

(Published February 2012)

In support of his initiative for 'national service for outstanding heads' Michael Wilshaw is reported as saying 'Your country needs you'. Before signing on, conscripts need to remember what happened in France the first time that slogan was used a century ago.

(Published February 2012)

Your correspondent does not go far enough in suggesting that the ‘manager’ of Ofsted needs replacing. It’s not even the ‘team’ that needs replacing. It’s the bullying, insensitive accountability ‘game’ that needs abolishing. There is a precedent: bear-baiting was prohibited by parliament in 1835.

(Unpublished April 2012)

Estelle Morris is right; we don’t know what is happening in academies. Ideally we ought to send in government inspectors to report ‘without fear or favour’ to a chief inspector who then publishes a careful, evidence-full evaluation. But the current chief inspector is not only an ex academy head but also a zealous, untiring advocate of government policies promoting academies as *the* solution to so many educational ills. What do we do? We can’t instantly resurrect the respected HM Inspectorate of yore. Perhaps we should invite in inspectors from another country altogether whose head is still respected for his/her impartiality and judgment?

(Unpublished April 2012)

### **Testing and examinations**

The publication of the Bew report will not kill off the SATs controversy.

The ‘creative writing’ test is to go partly as a sop to cover the retention otherwise unscathed of the current discredited testing regime and partly because that writing test has always been unreliable and its results a yearly embarrassment to testing agencies and government.

Those of us who oppose testing, not in itself but as the main mechanism for school accountability, will continue our opposition. The Bew inquiry and the predictable government response will provide little or no relief from a testing regime that many, children, parents and teachers, find both oppressive and unfair.

(Unpublished July 2011)

The recently released league tables apparently show that 1,310 primary schools fall below the expected standards. Yet those expected standards are arbitrary measures decreed by the government – and not ones which many teachers and others concerned with primary education would recognise as fair or valid.

It is telling that ‘fall’ in the body of the *Guardian* article is replaced by ‘fail’ in the headlines. The letter L is replaced by the letter I. Tellingly, it is ‘I’, the child who doesn’t quite achieve level 4 in the tested subjects, who bears the brunt of the sense of personal failure and inadequacy inflicted by this deeply flawed, arbitrary assessment regime. Those personal costs to self-esteem are incalculable and cannot be captured, or remedied, by any arbitrary measure.

(Published December 2011)

At the time of Dickens' bicentenary how appropriate that a chief examiner offering examination advice, presumably in addition to his other activities, be called Perks!

(Published December 2011)

### **Phonics and all that**

As the so-called but misnamed 'expert' who first proposed the idea of a reading assessment at the end of year 1 to the conservative opposition (as it was then) I fully support the critics of the government's phonics check at age six. My original idea was an informally administered, unobtrusive diagnostic assessment going well beyond phonics in order to identify those children who needed further targeted support in early reading. I still advocate that approach.

However, I have learnt an important non-phonics lesson. Never make a suggestion that can be easily manipulated to meet politicians' known prejudices. It's a lesson that members of the current curriculum review panels should ponder.

(Published July 2011)

Following their specialist training on detecting extremism will inspectors be able to distinguish between would-be jihadi teachers promoting terrorism and wide-eyed extremist teachers promoting synthetic phonics? Once spotted by a vigilant Ofsted team will both Ayman-al-Zawahiri and Nick Gibb both be banned from English classrooms?

(Published June 2011)

David Bell is moving on from Sanctuary Buildings. Given his support, as DfE permanent secretary, for the government's line on synthetic phonics, and in the light of recurring criticisms of the literacy levels of new undergraduates, is he moving to the University of Reading or to the University of Reading?

(Unpublished October 2011)

While supportive of the view that creationism should not be taught in state-funded schools I find it ironic that Michael Gove, the self-proclaimed champion of 'freeing up schools from government interference', should now be withdrawing funding from schools that fail to meet strict criteria relating to what they should teach. Will he also be withdrawing funding from state-funded primary academies who do not full endorse his policy of insisting on the teaching of synthetic phonics?

(Unpublished January 2012)

It is uncontested that literacy standards need to be improved. But that would be true of any country at any time including those who currently top the international literacy tables. We should always want more for our children. Michael Wilshaw's proposal to raise the official literacy target in primary

schools 'to provide an adequate foundation for success at secondary school' and thence improve results at GCSE and in international league tables rests on a number of assumptions. He assumes that the current English testing regime at age 11 and 16 provides valid assessments of pupils' literacy along with the international PISA tests for fifteen year olds. That assumption is challengeable to say the very least. He assumes that the literacy problem lies in primary schools failing to provide that proper foundation rather than with secondary schools failing to provide adequate teaching of more advanced literacy building on it. Again challengeable. He assumes that castigating primary education in a public literacy blame game will shame teachers into improving their practice – yet again highly questionable. He assumes that his and his organisation's judgments about the state of literacy are widely respected and based on highly reliable and valid inspection evidence. They are not.

(Unpublished March 2012)

### **On funding and pay**

Lord Hill, the schools minister, is promising 'fairer funding' across the board. Great ... but 'across the board'? That would involve independent schools helping to fund the pupil premium in state schools as part of their contribution to the 'big society' and as proof that 'we're all in this together'. But we all know, don't we, that that would be a financial step too far both for those schools and for the government.

(Published April 2011)

If the proposal to bring in lower salaries for public sector are accepted shouldn't the Windsors' civil list be reduced commensurately as they spend a considerable amount of time (including long holidays) in economically disadvantaged areas such as the Highlands and Cornwall?

(Published March 2012)

I wonder what range of educational benefits could be given to the children of Durand Academy with the £152,000 paid instead to its PR firm. Perhaps the children themselves could decide. Once published those decisions would make for really good publicity!

(Unpublished April 2012)

### **On the 'national' curriculum**

The curriculum review is soon to publish its first set of proposals. But the first set of 'free schools' opening their doors this month are not required to follow any revised national curriculum nor are academies or independent schools. If Michael Gove has his way by vastly increasing the number of free schools and academies this revised curriculum will eventually become a minority national



curriculum – an oxymoron. Perhaps not the only Gove-type moron, oxy- or otherwise, to feature in contemporary educational policy-making.

(Unpublished September 2011)

The current curriculum review which is in danger of marginalising or even omitting the arts was set up, in the government's own words, to 'embody our cultural and scientific heritage; the *best* that our past and present generations have to pass on to the next'. Its members could do well to heed words from the past uttered by Edmond Holmes, a former chief inspector, who back in 1911 argued that the curriculum should be designed to foster children's abilities:

- (1) to talk and listen
- (2) to act (in the dramatic sense of the word)
- (3) to draw, paint and model
- (4) to dance and sing
- (5) to know the why of things
- (6) to construct things'

That cultural heritage, supposedly beloved by the current government, surely ought to include due consideration of the observations of wise educationalists such as Edmond Holmes as well as those of David Puttnam and Kevin Spacey.

(Published November 2011)

If Michael Gove calls for an investigation into examiners giving teachers the questions before the examinations have been taken, shouldn't we be calling for an independent investigation into how he and Nick Gibb have given those reviewing the national curriculum the key questions and many of the answers before they've even examined the issues?

(Published December 2011)

Make no mistake. If acted upon, the 'expert' panel report for the National Curriculum Review would reinforce, rather than dissipate, some of the deleterious trends to which English primary education has been subject in recent years. With its proposals for a four 'league' primary curriculum focussed on the three 'premier' core subjects (with others relegated to second-, third or even fourth-class status) and its proposals for testable attainment targets in the core at the end of each two-year key stage it would reinforce the kind of impoverished curriculum already foisted on too many schools by punitive inspection and testing systems. Given the panel's 'welcome' for the government's highly contestable external testing regime the tyranny of testing would be even more burdensome.

Don't be misled. This is not a truly independent, nor even expert, report. It has clearly been 'framed' with political imperatives in mind. It does indeed meet the very tight, politically constrained remit it was given at the outset; it never even indirectly questions it or hints at the inadequacy of that brief. The report may be the best that the panel thought they could come up with in the

current political circumstances. They should, however, have resisted the temptation to fudge matters by tempering educational aspiration with contemporary political correctness. The future of the primary curriculum is too important to be subject to short-term political priorities- here endorsed by a compromised panel. Children in primary schools deserve better.

(Unpublished January 2012)

### **On vocational education**

For too long our schooling system has been premised on the distinction between 'gold'(i.e. academic) pupils, 'silver' (i.e. technical) and brass (ie the rest). In an Olympic year where in a sporting context these kinds of distinctions might be meaningful, we should renounce Platonic, self-fulfilling discrimination and promote a new gold standard of academic/vocational education which fosters and celebrates qualities such as adaptability, resilience, self-confidence and love of both hands-on and minds-on learning.

(Published February 2012)

### **On a dark knight ... hood**

If Chris Woodhead is to be awarded a knighthood for services to education shouldn't Adolf Hitler be awarded a posthumous knighthood for services to peace?

(Unpublished June 2011)

### **On modesty**

All of us in education including Chris Woodhead would benefit from the modesty and perspicacity of Edmond Holmes, an earlier chief inspector, who commented a century ago 'I recognise no final authority in pedagogy, a sphere of human labour in which the light is as darkness and we are seekers still'.

(Published September 2011)

### **On gifts**

It may be contentious but I support Michael Gove's idea to link a gift of £60 million to the forthcoming diamond jubilee. The Windsors' donation of such a sum to keep open children's centres that would otherwise close would be a fitting way for the queen to demonstrate her concern for the welfare of her humblest and youngest subjects.

(Published January 2012)

### **On hypocrisy**

Isn't it hypocritical of the leaders of the NAHT and ASCL to quote approvingly the OECD league table for headteacher performance while elsewhere castigating ministers' use of league tables for reporting school performance?

(Published March 2012)

### **On truancy**

If four-year-olds who miss non-compulsory nursery classes are to be targeted, shouldn't the same apply to MPs who miss free votes in the Commons? Perhaps their parliamentary allowances or their families' child benefit could be cut as a disincentive?

(Published April 2012)

### **On revolution**

Instead of quoting test marx let's misquote and act on Karl Marx: 'Teachers of the world (well, England) unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains ... especially if you're part of one.'

(Published March 2012)

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