
The Enigmatic Mr Gove

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ABSTRACT Michael Gove's personal tastes and priorities dominate the education landscape as he drives through reforms designed to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn 'the best that has been thought and said' as a foundation for upward social mobility. This article examines the coherence and progress of the government's reform programme, explores the personal history and contribution of Mr Gove himself, and considers the prospects for success. It argues that the Education Secretary is a 'riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma' and that his flawed understanding of society and education have fatally compromised his plans. His vision involves returning the nation's teachers and children to the lost world of private education in Scotland during the 1980s, and his visceral contempt for state schools and teachers has led him to alienate the professionals on whom true success depends. The article concludes that Mr Gove is the victim of his own limited education.

Introduction

Michael Gove has become the charismatic rising hope of the Conservative Party and is viewed by some as a potential contender for the leadership, should the present Prime Minister falter at the next election (Tory Diary, 2013). But Mr Gove shows no sign of weariness with his current post and by May 2015 he will have served longer as Education Secretary than anyone since the Second World War. He wants to be the 'heir to Blair' and has promised an 'unashamedly elitist' approach in state schools, vowing to give today's children the same opportunities as those previously enjoyed by grammar school pupils (Chapman, 2011; Ross, 2013). Mr Gove has mobilised the full powers of his office to drive through an agenda that has provoked an intense reaction.

At the National Association of Head Teachers' (NAHT) conference, the Education Secretary was heckled and shouted down, and members passed a vote of no confidence in his education reforms. The proposer claimed that many of the government's 'education policies are failing our children, their parents and

the very fabric of our school communities', while the head of an infant school told the minister: 'The culture we've got at the moment is one of bullying and fear' (Paton, 2013). The Secretary of State continues to press forward with further announcements, unabashed and undeterred. Some commentators, however, believe that the education reforms 'are perhaps this government's single greatest accomplishment' (Nelson, 2013) and have become irreversible (Hurst, 2013).

These contrasting judgements are based on Mr Gove's imperious style and bold rhetoric rather than on significant changes in classroom practice or measurable improvements in attainment. A profusion of announcements, initiatives and newspaper articles has aroused powerful emotions without necessarily clarifying Mr Gove's purposes. This article aims, therefore, to scrutinise the coherence of the education reform agenda since 2010, to examine significant flaws and contradictions in the government's programme, and to assess the prospects for improved student outcomes. Is Mr Gove engaged in a political project to serve his party's interest, or should we believe his claim to be a serious social reformer, determined to help the disadvantaged?

Darling of the Right

Political and professional opponents view Mr Gove's role in education with dismay. Since 2010, they believe, education policy-making has become a frenetic field of activity, energised by an apparently demented sorcerer's apprentice who has lost control of his broom. The workshop is flooding fast, with schools, teachers and children rushing for dry ground that is disappearing before their eyes. The Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme has been scrapped (BBC News, 2010a), education maintenance allowances have been cut (Paton, 2011), reductions in school budgets have curbed the benefits of the pupil premium, supposed to help disadvantaged young people (Abrams, 2011; BBC News, 2012), and funding for school sport has been slashed (BBC News, 2010b). Higher education tuition fees have been trebled, curriculum and assessment arrangements have been upturned, and examinations have been made more difficult (Barker, 2012, 2013). The eleven-plus examination is to be reintroduced, with pupils ranked against their peers across the country (Chorley, 2013).

It seems that we have entered an era of hyper reform, with the failure of one set of measures providing the rationale for the next (Barker, 2010). Privatisation has accelerated, with predatory academy chains annexing local authority schools and swallowing their budgets (NCSL, 2012). Although national strategies for improvement have been abandoned, Mr Gove has demanded a 'great leap forward' in standards, with *every* state school expected to achieve the national average GCSE performance by 2015. The lunatics really do seem to be in charge of the asylum, with almost every policy development greeted with surprise, disbelief and sometimes anger. The teacher unions have launched a sustained campaign of industrial action against frozen pay, lost

pension entitlements and worsening conditions of service (NUT, 2013). Even Tory MPs have shared the general alarm, with the House of Commons Education Committee (2013, p. 26) warning earlier this year of the ‘turbulence and disruption’ that could be caused by rapid changes to high-stakes qualifications. The Secretary of State’s readiness to announce hard-line positions without consultation and then to retreat from them has added to the widespread perception that education policy is ill considered and unstable.

In September 2012, for example, the government proposed to replace GCSEs in English, Mathematics and Sciences with English Baccalaureate Certificates (EBCs), and to introduce single-subject examination boards. On 6 February 2013, Mr Gove abandoned both plans as ‘a bridge too far’ and acknowledged the risks associated with his original scheme (Barker, 2013; Gove, 2013b). After almost three years insisting that history should be taught to illustrate the ‘wonderfulness of us’ (Evans, 2011), the Education Secretary backed down in response to angry criticism of his proposals. Simon Schama, Sir Richard Evans and Sir David Cannadine complained that the draft curriculum over-emphasised English history and required too much detail, while the Historical Association reported that 96% of teachers thought Mr Gove’s plans were too prescriptive (Mansell, 2013). Despite these U-turns, he is unrepentant and aims now to achieve his goals by reforming rather than replacing the GCSE. The Secretary of State has a reputation as an attentive listener, but none of his admirers can recall an occasion when he has been persuaded to change his mind, and his much-admired courtesy seems not to extend to those ‘Marxist’ teachers who are ‘hell-bent on destroying our schools’ (Aitkenhead, 2012; Gove, 2013a).

These skirmishes have convinced many left-leaning critics that he is an opportunist and bruiser, determined to push through a reactionary agenda designed to win the support of Conservative backbenchers in a future leadership contest. Some commentators see him as a wrecker who is ruining the education system, while others are inclined to dismiss him as a lightweight whose policies are an irrelevance rather than a disaster (Wilby, 2012; Combi, 2013). Progressive educators have recognised that he is the darling of the Right, a rising star with the charisma and chutzpah to survive the consequences of his reckless apprenticeship, but they have been slow to grasp that he is in the process of stealing their clothes.

Fighting for Civil Rights

This slowness stems from an instinct to mistrust Mr Gove’s concern for the disadvantaged and to dismiss his desire to create a more equal society as empty rhetoric. But the Education Secretary’s incursion into the traditional territory of progressive politicians and educators may be a defining moment, as significant in its own way as Tony Blair’s adoption of privatisation as an important policy principle. Mr Gove argues that we ‘live in a profoundly unequal society’ and is outraged that ‘those who are born poor are more likely to stay poor and those

who inherit privilege are more likely to pass on privilege in England than in any comparable country'. He finds the resulting social stratification and segregation 'morally indefensible' and positions himself and the government as passionate advocates of social justice, concerned to produce a better society that is more fair and more equal (Gove, 2012).

Mr Gove (2013a) presents himself, therefore, as a British version of Barack Obama, fighting the civil rights battle of our time, and asserts that he is 'determined to do everything [he] can to help the poorest children in our country' transcend their disadvantaged backgrounds. Access to a quality education, he complains, 'is rationed for the poor, the vulnerable and those from minority communities' and he declares that his 'moral purpose in Government is to break the lock which prevents children from our poorest families making it into our best universities and walking into the best jobs' (Gove, 2011). Mr Gove has embraced the progressive agenda and argues that the civil rights battlefield is education.

For him, the academic success and social dominance of the public schools illustrate both the problem (a huge qualification and skills gap between rich and poor) and the solution (everyone should have access to the best possible curriculum and teachers). Students from top private schools are heavily over-represented in the best universities and leading professions, while 'just one child from all the state schools in the whole London Borough of Greenwich makes it to Oxford' (Gove, 2011). Eton sends more pupils to Oxford and Cambridge than the entire population on benefits. The coalition's main priority is, therefore, to reduce the differences in attainment between rich and poor so that we can all become 'authors of our own life stories' (DfE, 2010, p. 6).

From Mr Gove's perspective, therefore, unequal outcomes in education and the job market demonstrate the inadequacy of the school system and justify far-reaching reforms to ensure that students from all social backgrounds leave school in the 'best possible position' to advance their learning and future careers (HM Government, 2011, p. 44). Social justice will be assured when every school offers an education that 'matches the best in the independent sector' (HM Government, 2011, p. 38). The Education Secretary seems determined that his expanded academy network shall emulate the independence, quality and rigour of the best private schools and provide a ladder of opportunity open to all regardless of background. He sees curriculum and examination reform as providing an essential framework for raising standards and achievement for everyone.

Old-fashioned values are to be harnessed to a great progressive cause.

Mysterious Past

This bold but paradoxical policy stance has proved effective in disorienting a Labour opposition that believes in improving examination results almost as much as the Secretary of State himself (Politics Home, 2013). But Mr Gove's new-found passion for helping the poor may seem implausible to those who

have read his journalism in *The Times*, written before he entered the House of Commons in 2005. His articles reveal an obsessive right-wing Eurosceptic who has shown little trace of social liberalism or even a social conscience (Aitkenhead, 2012). Mr Gove begins to seem ‘a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma’ [1], a virtuoso in impression management rather than an education expert committed to social reform.

The mystery begins with Mr Gove’s claim that his personal background has given him a special affinity with the disadvantaged and has inspired his passion for education. His biography is presented as a Hans Christian Andersen story, with Gove as an ugly duckling who is changed into a lovely swan by a splendid private school. One of our hero’s ‘earliest childhood memories was of watching his father skinning and gutting fish by hand as dawn broke over the harbour in the granite city of Aberdeen’ (Pierce, 2010). But this was not to be young Michael’s fate. He was ‘exceptionally bright’ and won a place at Robert Gordon’s College (Pierce, 2010). The duckling was transformed and he found his way to ‘the hallowed corridors of Lady Margaret Hall, set in acres of landscaped grounds overlooking the River Cherwell’ where he ‘finessed his razor-sharp debating skills’ (Pierce, 2010). A traditional education is supposed to have enabled the adopted son of a man who skinned and gutted fish ‘by hand’ to become the author of his own life story and to walk into the best jobs in the country.

This is the *Daily Mail* version of his biography, based on an interview given a few weeks before the 2010 general election. The *Guardian* has another. Young Michael’s adopted father was not a dockside manual worker but ran a successful family fish-processing business. Gove senior purchased a semi-detached house and paid school fees. Robert Gordon’s College was not a distinguished public day school but the second-cheapest private day school in Scotland, described by a former pupil as a glorified grammar. This ‘traditional’ boys’ school selected about half its pupils from state primaries, and creamed talent from the surrounding neighbourhood. The young Michael ‘never shared a desk with anyone who struggled to read and write’ and was protected from contact with ‘rough boys’ (Aitkenhead, 2012). Michael Gove may have seemed ‘exceptionally bright’ in the sheltered environment of an undistinguished Scottish private school, but at Oxford his upper second failed to match the achievements of contemporaries like Ed Balls and David Cameron.[2]

Together, these stories suggest that young Michael’s passion for education (it worked for me) and his limited understanding of what is involved in providing good and appropriate schooling for the full ability range (follow my example, not your needs) stem from his personal experiences in Scotland. He acknowledges that his mother and father were ‘classic aspirational parents who knew what they wanted’ and he has fulfilled their desire for him to achieve upward mobility (Pierce, 2010). But he does not have a realistic appraisal of his own success. His parents were much better off than those of the free-school-meal children to whom he wishes to extend the benefits of an academic education, and he attributes too much of his talent and personality to his formal

education and too little to the culture and dispositions of his adoptive family. He does not appreciate that his work now is seriously compromised by the limitations of his private schooling. He met few ordinary people, formed an unrealistic understanding of British society, and imbibed the typical prejudices of those who pay fees, whereby they avoid mixing with everyone else. He expects to assuage the nagging guilt of the upwardly mobile by promising comparable success to those who are prepared to follow his example. Mr Gove's sincerity is not the problem; the problem is his false hope that the Robert Gordon formula can produce a more equal society. There is something profoundly odd about the idea that private schools, set up to exclude the lower orders, should inspire a crusade to overcome disadvantage.

Contradictions and Riddles

Shaped by these mysterious influences, Mr Gove has adopted a number of apparently contradictory positions. Before the 2010 election he was anxious to proclaim the importance of 'greater freedom for professionals' and emphasised his belief in the advantages of freedom from central control. He declared his support for the cause of 'greater autonomy, in the context of deeper collaboration' and said that school freedoms were 'central to Conservative education plans' (Gove, 2009, p. 28). On gaining office, as we have seen, he scrapped the National Strategies as well as the Qualification and Curriculum Agency, jettisoned the previous government's target-setting regime, and promised fewer Ofsted inspections (Barker, 2012).

But there is also evidence of continuity with the controlling habits of the previous regime. Schools remain accountable for achievement and must meet 'floor standards', rather than 'floor targets' (Mansell, 2011). Some 1400 primary schools have been declared below the 'minimum floor standard' and it seems unlikely that they will enjoy much freedom in the years ahead (Chapman & Loveys, 2011). The Education Secretary waxes lyrical about the importance of professional leadership and teaching, but in practice prefers to micromanage the system to ensure compliance with the Robert Gordon template. He believes the purity of his vision can be compromised only by consultation with the education establishment, 'guilty men and women who have deprived a generation of the knowledge they need' (Gove, 2013a).

Mr Gove's outburst against these 'Enemies of Promise' provides another example of the contradictory impulses that drive his political style (Gove, 2013a). On the one hand he presents himself as an apostle of rigorous academic learning, an intellectual pre-eminently concerned with challenging the shallow values of the age and returning the nation to the enjoyment of 'the best that has been thought and said' [3] (Wyse, 2013). On the other, he is a clever politician prepared to engage in ruthless journalistic propaganda to discredit his opponents and to push his preferred policies through, with or without evidence that they can produce the desired results. The headline phrase 'Enemies of Promise' establishes the Education Secretary as an intellectual, able to cite Cyril

Connolly and remember that the original book was published 'exactly 75 years ago'. But then he invents a smearing if clichéd phrase ('Marxist teachers hell-bent on destroying our schools') with which to taunt and mock an imaginary enemy. The Marxist teachers turn out to be a group of 100 academics who had the temerity to question the wisdom of coalition education policy. Mr Gove's claim that his critics are Marxists is based on quotations from two unnamed members of the group. Rather than document this generalised libel, Mr Gove hastens to add further allegations about teachers in university education departments, to whom he applies the sneering phrase 'The Blob' (Gove, 2013a). This Secretary of State does not model the intellectual rigour he demands from others.

He is even less rigorous in statistical matters, failing to understand that norm-referenced examinations compare the relative performance of students taking the same paper and cannot be used to measure standards in general or improvement over time. This 'exceptionally bright' product of a Scottish private school has trouble grasping the statistical phenomenon of the normal distribution curve. It is not possible for every school and every student to be above average, although grade boundaries can be adjusted to give the impression of better performance.

The Enigma

Under Mr Gove, education reform has become an intensely personal project, with teachers and children obliged to follow the Pied Piper on his journey, whether it is right for them or not. Government policies have become indistinguishable from Mr Gove's own personality and vision, and are compromised by the mystery and riddles embodied in this would-be author of other people's lives. His instinctive distaste for state schools and for those who work in them and his demand that they become something else entirely have alienated the very teachers on whom the future of education depends.

But the enigma of Mr Gove lies deeper still. Does he sincerely wish to produce greater equality, with every inner-city child deploying the language of Chaucer, Pope and Dryden? His own upward mobility has carried him far from Aberdeen, far away from his adoptive family and far above the working poor of the community he has left behind. But when everyone has learned the trick, who will remain in Aberdeen and how much will the Conservative mind then value qualifications that are universally shared? Does Mr Gove really hope to be reunited with the 'rough boys' from Aberdeen and to practise a politics in which social divisions play no part? Could he cope if Utopia arrives, against all expectations?

Notes

- [1] Winston Churchill described Russia in these terms during a radio broadcast in October 1939.
- [2] Balls and Cameron both achieved firsts. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ed_Balls and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Cameron
- [3] Michael Gove borrowed the phrase from Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869).

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