
Goodbye Michael Gove

MICHAEL BASSEY

ABSTRACT Michael Gove was Secretary of State for Education from May 2010 to July 2014 when the Prime Minister sacked him. With strong opinions arising from his own life experiences and outstanding energy for reform, but severely limited understanding of education and a refusal to consult teachers and other professionals, he imposed half-baked ideas on the millions of young people in our schools and their teachers. We need a better way of making education policy.

When drafting this critique of the work of our then current Secretary of State for Education, I was wearing a T-shirt bearing a cartoon face of him wearing a dunces' cap (a birthday present from my step-daughter). On my desk was a book purporting to be written by him entitled *Everything I Know about Teaching*: its 95 pages are all blank.



I can't remember another Secretary of State for Education who attracted such robust buffoonery from his critics. Yet he was the darling of the right-wing press: the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* regularly sang his praises. Why? Seemingly because he was seen as a man of action, one who – unlike some of his ministerial colleagues – could make 'tough' decisions. Catastrophically many of his decisions were based on a narrow ideology rejected by most teachers and

often contrary to relevant evidence. Now that he has gone I can take off the T-shirt! But there are still questions to be asked.

Michael Gove became Secretary of State for Education in May 2010 when the coalition government was formed. Before entering Parliament as the member for Surrey Heath in 2005, he was a journalist on *The Times*. Like nearly all ministers who have had charge of English education, he had no teaching experience beyond his own schooling and parenthood. But this did not prevent him from introducing major changes in the organisation of state education and, like many of his predecessors of both Left and Right, he rarely took significant heed of the views of teachers, parents, academics, writers, artists and others who tried to advise him.

Contrary to the views of most of the teaching profession, he believed that: rote learning is the best preliminary to understanding; ex-soldiers will be good for school discipline; top marks must be awarded to limited numbers rather than on achievement criteria; written examinations with time constraints are the best way of assessing ability; teachers do not necessarily need training; science, history and geography are more important subjects than art, music, drama, and design; a place at Oxford or Cambridge universities should be the aspiration of many; it is poor teaching, not environmental deprivation, that usually leads to low achievements in schools; the aesthetics of buildings do not affect the quality of learning; and that young children should learn to read through the prime use of synthetic phonics, be tested at age six and their parents advised if they fail.

His blunders over cancellation of many of the previous government's Building Schools for the Future plans, the abolition of the education maintenance allowances, and the massive cut in funding of schools sports partnerships, affected many young people. His attempt to replace GCSE in English, mathematics, science, history, geography and a language by a more demanding Baccalaureate failed, but instead he managed to raise the bar in GCSE and A-level examinations and change the grading system. Instead of basing such major changes on political consensus and professional support, Michael Gove rushed it, eschewing trials, in order to make it a fait accompli before the next general election.

The way in which he turned Labour's limited academy programme for struggling schools into a phoney bonanza for first of all the top-graded secondary schools and then into a government expectation for all, with bullying of recalcitrant schools followed by fiat, and later a focus on primary schools, showed a mastery of political cunning coupled with managerial skill – but little educational understanding. Moving the oversight of schools renamed as academies from local authorities to governing bodies that are responsible only to the Department of Education seems to have contributed to the 'Trojan Horse' situation in Birmingham. The legislation that ruled that the ethos, aims and objectives of a school should be set by the governing body (a completely daft notion) enabled extremist governors to play havoc in a number of schools. No doubt Mr Gove was horrified by this development, but he was responsible for the lack of an effective system to hold the academies accountable.

Mr Gove made no secret of his view that a future Conservative government might let state schools be run for profit by commercial bodies. How such privatisation would work is not clear, but it fits with right-wing ideology about the merit of unrestrained markets.

Is there any wonder that last year there was an e-petition to 'Remove Michael Gove as Secretary of State for Education'? (Why it only collected 4308 signatures before its time expired is uncertain.) Googling 'Gove must go' reveals several websites. There was a lot of frustrated anger among teachers and parents.

Michael Gove had a trait that must be judged dangerous in government ministers: he expected everyone to respond to circumstances in the way that he did. Thus being a successful journalist led him to believe that time-restricted examination written papers are the best way to measure attainment; being adopted as a child seems to have led him to argue (in ways that are unclear) that schools must completely overcome any disadvantages that are attributable to their parents and home environments; retaking the driving test six times shows that he treated failure as a challenge rather than a defeat; and having a deep appreciation for what may be termed high-brow culture led him to insist that schools should instil the same in their pupils.

Mr Gove did not recognise that his personal *modus operandi* and life style are not universal. He wanted every child to succeed as he has and failed to understand that there are many variations on the idea of the successful person. In the process he praised teachers on the one hand and bullied them on the other. Knowing that his period of office would be limited, he looked for rapid change and declined to seek democratic consensus from all who have a stake in education: parents, teachers, employers, academics, public figures, and young people themselves.

It needs to be recognised that Michael Gove, as a government minister, was dangerous. With outstanding energy for reform, but severely limited understanding of education, he imposed half-baked ideas on the millions of young people in our schools and their teachers. At last the prime minister realised this and sacked him, but his legacy looks disastrous.

We should ask how one man, elected to Parliament by a majority of 17,269 electors of the constituency of Surrey Heath, was allowed the dictatorial power to play havoc with our educational system. Why were there no controls over his authority? Why could he ignore the views of so many teachers, academics and local politicians – pouring scorn on them and calling them 'the Blob'? How can we call our country a democracy when the likes of Dictator Gove are allowed to dominate? We need a better way of formulating education policy. Is Labour listening?

MICHAEL BASSEY is an emeritus professor of Education at Nottingham Trent University and author of *Education for the Inevitable: schooling when the oil runs out*. Correspondence: bassey355@btinternet.com