
Gove v. the Blob: the Coalition and education

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ABSTRACT The author provides a year-by-year account of events during the period of the Conservative-led coalition government from 2010 to 2015 and concludes with some observations on the damage done to England's state education system.

2010-11. Gove: a man in a hurry

Following the inconclusive general election in May 2010, David Cameron (Conservative) formed a coalition government with Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrat) as his deputy, George Osborne as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Michael Gove as Secretary of State for Education, leading a renamed Department for Education (DfE).

The Schools

Gove immediately wrote to all primary and secondary schools in England inviting them to become academies. His Academies Bill, created in haste and rushed through Parliament, removed local authorities' power to veto a school becoming an academy; dispensed with parents' and teachers' legal right to oppose such plans; and allowed 'outstanding' schools to 'fast-track' the process of becoming academies. There was widespread concern at the proposals and the lack of debate, but Gove insisted that the changes were urgently needed because more than a thousand schools had already applied to become academies. After the Academies Act received the Royal Assent on 27 July it was revealed that the number of schools which had actually applied for academy status was just 153. The problems with academies – and the widespread hostility to them – showed no signs of abating.

Gove modelled his free schools' policy on that of Sweden, ignoring research which showed that the schools had not been the unqualified success he

claimed. He told local authorities that his new education bill would force them to support free school or academy proposals whenever a new school was needed.

By February 2011 40 free schools had been given initial approval. The process lacked the transparency which Cameron had promised: the DfE would not say what it was spending on free schools and refused a Freedom of Information request to identify groups applying to open them.

Meanwhile, ministers were talking about cutting education spending by up to £3.5 billion. The biggest cuts affected the schools rebuilding programme. Labour's £55 billion Building Schools for the Future (BSF) project was scrapped and Gove had to apologise for supplying an erroneous list of cancelled building projects. By October 2010 it was clear that even those projects which were going ahead faced cuts of 40%. In July 2011, following a High Court ruling that he had acted unfairly, Gove announced plans for a new, but smaller, building programme.

Another casualty of the cuts was the Education Maintenance Allowance, designed to encourage poorer students to stay on in education. Students demonstrated in London and in March 2011 Gove agreed to introduce a more limited bursaries scheme.

In October 2010 Clegg announced a £7 billion 'pupil premium' scheme to give schools extra funding for children from disadvantaged homes. He insisted that this would be new money but a week later Gove admitted that he had had to make cuts elsewhere in the education budget to fund the premium.

Labour's School Sports Partnerships scheme was scrapped. However, following protests, Gove was forced to keep elements of it going, at least until the 2012 London Olympics.

Curriculum and Assessment

Not content with massive changes to the structure and governance of schools, Gove was also determined to reform every aspect of the curriculum and examinations. In September 2010 he announced an 'English Baccalaureate' qualification for students passing General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations in English, mathematics, one science, one foreign language and one humanities subject. Heads were furious when the EBacc was used, without prior warning or consultation, as a GCSE performance measure in school league tables published in February 2011.

Gove's National Curriculum review was launched in January 2011 with the appointment of an advisory panel led by Tim Oates.

March 2011 saw the publication of three important documents:

- Clare Tickell's review of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Experts were concerned when the DfE replaced Tickell's four-page summary of young children's learning characteristics with a single paragraph;
- the government's green paper on special educational needs (SEN), which proposed the abolition of statementing and advocated personal budgets; and

- Alison Wolf's review of vocational education, which backed Gove's view of education as academic excellence for a few and vocational training for the rest.

In June 2011 Gove announced tougher examination targets for England's worst-performing schools and said he wanted to see a return to traditional examinations and less coursework. Meanwhile, Paul Bew's review of Key Stage 2 testing was published amid complaints from heads about the 'appalling marking' of some of the tests.

Teachers

Right from the start, Gove seemed to go out of his way to offend teachers. He insisted that teaching was a craft that could be learned simply by watching others: teacher training would therefore be moved out of universities and into schools. Poorly performing teachers would be speedily sacked.

Disputes began in the autumn of 2010 with a row over whether national pay and conditions would apply to teachers in newly converted academies. Then, in January 2011, the government announced changes to the teachers' pension scheme. Several teacher unions – including the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) – started discussing strike action.

Higher Education

Higher education also faced a battering in Gove's first year, with the planned increase in the number of places cut by more than half. However, the biggest disaster – for both students and the Liberal Democrat party – was the issue of tuition fees. Before the election Clegg had promised students that the party would abolish them, and after the election Vince Cable (Liberal Democrat leader of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills) proposed replacing them with a graduate tax. But in November Cable proposed tripling the fees to £9000 a year.

The Browne review of higher education funding, which had been commissioned by Labour, was largely ignored and the government's higher education white paper, published in June 2011, was 'just a mess', according to Peter Scott of the Institute of Education.

2011-12. Acceleration

In his second year as Secretary of State, Gove was determined to keep up the pressure and extend the scope of his changes.

The Schools

However, academisation continued to cause problems, including:

- a fourfold increase in employee disputes and concerns about private finance initiative (PFI) repayments, pensions for support staff, and budgets being 'adjusted';
- Oasis Academy MediaCityUK descended into chaos after 14 members of staff were made redundant;
- private schools showed little interest when Cameron pleaded with them to sponsor academies;
- parents at Downhills Primary School in Haringey voted overwhelmingly against academy status but the DfE handed the school to the Harris Federation;
- in 2011-12 academies and free schools were paid more than £26 million for 4700 sixth-form students who were never enrolled;
- 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;
- 128 academies faced having to repay an average of £118,000 because of another government funding blunder; and
- school meals campaigner Jamie Oliver attacked Gove for allowing academies to ignore national nutrition standards.

On top of all this, figures published by the DfE showed that academies were performing less well than local authority schools.

Undaunted, Gove announced that his next target for academisation would be 'underperforming' pupil referral units and that, from September, he would be able to direct 'obstructive councils' to cooperate with 'alternative providers'.

By the summer of 2012 more than half of England's secondary schools were academies.

The first free schools opened in September 2011, mostly serving middle-class areas which already had surplus places. Critics pointed out that the DfE had earmarked half its £1.2 billion school building budget to free school vanity projects, leaving insufficient funds for the 2000 extra primary schools which would soon be required.

None of this appeared to worry Gove. He announced that 79 more free schools would open in 2012, and a further 102 in 2013.

The Education Act 2011 received the Royal Assent on 15 November. Based on the white paper *The Importance of Teaching*, it abolished five quangos:

- the General Teaching Council;
- the Training and Development Agency for Schools;
- the School Support Staff Negotiating Body;
- the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency; and
- the Young People's Learning Agency for England.

It also made wide-ranging provisions relating to:

- early years;
- discipline;

- the school workforce;
- qualifications and the curriculum;
- careers advice;
- school profiles, admissions, meals, governing bodies, inspection exemptions, academies;
- apprenticeships and training;
- special needs provision; and
- student loans and fees.

In January 2012 the government's new admissions code stripped parents of their right to object to a school's expansion plans. Kent County Council immediately announced that Sevenoaks would get a grammar school annexe.

In the same month, Michael Wilshaw replaced Christine Gilbert as head of the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) and set out a raft of controversial policies. Unions discussed launching a campaign of non-cooperation with Ofsted and Christine Gilbert warned that teacher morale was at 'rock bottom'.

By March 2012 Gove's school building programme had ground to a halt, schools' capital spending had been drastically cut and local authorities were being forced to sell public assets to raise cash for school refurbishment. Yet more budget cuts were announced, affecting the Every Child a Reader and Numbers Count projects, local authority music services, Sure Start centres and careers advice.

Curriculum and Assessment

The advisory panel chaired by Tim Oates published its *Framework for the National Curriculum* [2] in December 2011. The government had originally intended that new curricula for English, mathematics, science and physical education would be introduced from 2013, with other subjects following a year later, but Gove was now forced to admit that this timetable was too ambitious. His proposed curriculum reforms were attacked by three of the four members of the advisory panel.

Thousands of vocational qualifications were removed from school league tables. In future, only 70 would count towards the main performance measure of five A*–C grades at GCSE.

In March the government published its new EYFS, largely based on Tickell's recommendations. Some practitioners warned that the slimming-down had gone too far.

The government's obsession with 'synthetic phonics' continued unabated. Schools were criticised for not buying more phonics schemes from a government-approved catalogue, and Gove warned that Ofsted would send inspectors to courses where trainees complained about their phonics training.

At an Ofqual conference in October 2011, Gove argued that the A* grade should be limited to a fixed percentage of candidates, who might be ranked

against others taking the same subject. In April 2012, he said he wanted universities to determine the content of A level syllabuses and set the examination questions: the new syllabuses would be taught from 2014. Universities, heads and examiners expressed concerns.

In June 2012 a leaked DfE document revealed that Gove was planning to replace the GCSE with a 1950s-style two-tier system modelled on O levels and CSEs (Certificate of Secondary Education). The plan was shelved when the Liberal Democrats refused to support it.

A fortnight later the DfE announced that proposed changes to the funding of sixth forms would be postponed for three years. Unions had warned that the new system would effectively limit students to three A level subjects.

In 2012 the AQA examination board raised the threshold for C grade GCSE passes from 54% in January to 66% in June, and the proportion of students getting good GCSE grades fell for the first time in the exam's 24-year history. Gove denied pressuring boards to lower grades; but there was a public outcry, heads demanded that papers should be re-marked, and some local authorities and academies threatened legal action.

By the end of the school year, schools were facing the introduction of new O level-type examinations in English, mathematics and science, redesigned GCSEs in other subjects, and tougher A levels – all at the same time. Glenys Stacey, head of Ofqual, warned the government that attempting to push through too many reforms at once risked 'failure' and a senior examination board official privately described the timescale as 'madness'.

Teachers

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) reported that more than a third of heads were now so disillusioned they were actively planning to resign. Gove was defiant. 'Lest anyone think we have reached a point where we should slacken the pace of reform', he told the ASCL conference, 'let me reassure them – we have to accelerate'.

More strikes were held over pensions and pay, and relations deteriorated further when:

- Osborne signalled his intention to impose regional pay;
- Gove argued that national pay scales should be abolished altogether;
- the Commons Education Select Committee (CESC) advocated performance-related pay; and
- Gove announced that, like free schools, academies would now be allowed to employ unqualified teachers.

2012-13. Growing Concerns

The Schools

In November 2012, the National Audit Office (NAO) reported an overspend of £1 billion on academies in the previous two years and noted that Ofsted had rated almost half of sponsored academies as inadequate or satisfactory – the latter now defined as ‘requiring improvement’.

Ofsted inspectors said forced academisation was hindering the improvement of primary schools because heads and governors were having to spend large amounts of time in meetings with DfE ‘brokers’, staff and parents.

There were even concerns about the academies programme within the DfE itself. A leaked paper warned that, with the number of academies and free schools expected to rise dramatically, the risks included ‘decreased ability to overcome resistance at local level’ (Mansell, 2013).

Meanwhile, the problems continued:

- Roke primary school in Croydon was handed to the Harris Federation despite hostility from parents;
- parents were furious when the DfE ruled that academy trusts could move pupils to other schools in their chains without consultation; and
- *The Observer* (20 July 2013) revealed that the Academy Enterprise Trust (AET), criticised for poor management of its schools, had paid nearly £500,000 of taxpayers’ money into the private business interests of its trustees and executives over a period of three years.

The free schools fared no better:

- the DfE pressured local authorities to make buildings available for schools which had not found premises;
- £400,000 was spent on two free schools – in Bradford and Rivendale – which never opened;
- Discovery Free School in Crawley, one of the first to open, was placed in special measures. Its unqualified head, Lindsey Snowdon, later resigned and the school was closed;
- more free schools opened in areas where there were already spare places. Suffolk, for example, had a 28% surplus of secondary places, yet three secondary free schools opened at a cost to the taxpayer of £3.67 million.

Following a campaign by the British Humanist Association, the Information Commissioner ruled that the DfE must reveal the names and religious affiliations, if any, of organisations applying to open free schools. In February 2013 Gove reluctantly released details of 517 applicants. Despite all the problems, Gove declared that free schools were now ‘an integral part of the growing success story of state education in England’ (Gove, 2013).

In October 2012, the government published design templates for new ‘no-frills’ school buildings, with simple designs, no curved walls or roofs, and 15% less space than those built under Labour’s BSF programme. Architect Lord

Rogers urged the government to think again 'for the sake of the next generation'.

With the NAO forecasting a shortfall of 256,000 school places in England and Wales by 2014, Gove announced that he was scrapping the right of four-year-olds to be given a full-time place in school.

Curriculum and Assessment

As the new school year began, Gove confirmed his intention to phase out GCSEs and replace them with an English Baccalaureate based on traditional end-of-year examinations. The CESC warned that the government risked destabilising the entire school examination system by rushing through its plans. In February 2013, amid rumours that Downing Street had intervened, Gove abandoned his plans for the EBacc, but insisted that GCSEs and league tables would still be reformed.

In January 2013 he announced that new A level courses devised by universities would be introduced in 2015. AS level would become a stand-alone qualification. A month later he published a new type of A level league table which listed the number of sixth-formers achieving AAB in three 'facilitating subjects'; other A levels did not count.

In February 2013 the DfE published details of a new Key Stage 2 test of English grammar, punctuation and spelling, and in July Clegg announced a consultation on whether to introduce a 'baseline' test for five-year-olds entering school.

Having already stripped most vocational qualifications from school league tables, Gove now planned to remove thousands of courses for 16-18-year-olds. *The National Curriculum in England* framework document, published in July 2013, included many changes from the draft proposals, but there were still concerns about the timetable for the implementation of the new curriculum, given that schools already faced changes to GCSEs, A levels and vocational qualifications.

Gove's school sports initiative was criticised for its emphasis on competitive team sports. A committee of members of parliament (MPs) warned that it risked becoming little more than a 'gimmick' that would fail to deliver a legacy from the London Olympics.

Teachers

Gove declared that performance-related pay for teachers in England and Wales would be introduced from September 2013. The unions planned more national and regional strikes.

In July 2012 Gove had announced a huge expansion of School Direct and a consequent cut in the funding of university-based teacher training courses. However, by July 2013 it was clear that only half of the planned 10,000 School Direct places had been filled, leading to concerns about future teacher shortages.

Other Matters

In October 2012 *The Guardian* revealed that ministers were planning to scrap the Early Intervention Grant, which included funding for Sure Start centres. Local councillors wrote to Cameron, asking him to intervene to stop a proposal they said would lead to ‘disproportionate cuts’ in preventative social programmes.

In January 2013 the DfE announced that the Children’s Food Trust would receive no further government funding and that future reviews of school food would be put out to tender. *The School Food Plan*, prepared for the government by Henry Dimbleby and John Vincent and published in July 2013, recommended that ‘free school meals should be extended to all primary school children, starting with the most deprived areas’ (p. 8), and suggested a set of ‘simpler food standards’ (Dimbleby & Vincent, 2013, p. 9).

2013-14. Downfall

By the beginning of Gove’s fourth year as education secretary, it was becoming clear that his strategy of changing everything at once was putting severe strain on the whole school system.

The Schools

The concerns about academies refused to go away:

- Ravens Wood academy in Bromley faced allegations that pupils’ performance in a BTEC course had been falsified;
- parents’ objections to academisation were ignored at many schools, including King’s Stanley primary school in Gloucestershire, Warren Comprehensive School in Chadwell Heath, and at Camden Junior School in Carshalton, which became a Harris academy despite opposition from 98% of parents;
- South Leeds Academy advertised for a mathematics teacher with at least four GCSEs;
- Nottingham University Samworth Academy was told to raise ‘unacceptably low’ standards;
- Oldfield School academy in Bath was put in special measures; and
- E-Act lost control of 10 of its 34 schools after Ofsted classified five as failing and six as requiring improvement.

Perhaps most embarrassing for Gove was data from Ofsted which showed that in 2012-13 24% of academies had worse inspection judgements than previously while only 18% of local authority schools suffered the same fate; and that more local authority schools than academies had improved. DfE civil servants urged Gove to abandon attempts to force schools to become academies because doing so was very expensive. He rejected their advice.

The free schools also continued to cause him embarrassment:

- Annaliese Briggs, appointed principal of Pimlico primary free school despite having no teaching qualifications, resigned a month after the school opened, saying she couldn't cope with the workload;
- the al-Madinah Islamic free school in Derby was banned from teaching secondary pupils after Ofsted described it as being 'in chaos'; and
- the Education Funding Agency reported financial irregularities – including £10,000 in fabricated rent invoices – at Kings Science Academy in Bradford, one of the first free schools to open.

And there was worse news to come. In December 2013 the NAO reported that the 174 free schools opened in the previous two years had cost £1.5 billion – more than three times the original Treasury grant of £450 million.

Meanwhile, the Local Government Association warned that councils had already had to find an extra £1 billion as rising pupil numbers strained budgets; and Labour claimed the number of infants being taught in classes of more than 30 had doubled since 2010.

Clegg announced free lunches for all infants in England and the DfE issued new regulations for school meals, but said schools which became academies between 2010 and 2014 would not have to comply with them.

Gove published new guidelines on behaviour in schools and both he and Wilshaw suggested that 'bad' parents should be punished. The number of parents fined for their children's truancy rose by a quarter.

Curriculum and Assessment

At the start of the autumn term Ofqual warned that Gove's timetable for changes to GCSE and A level examinations was too ambitious. The DfE announced that the changes would be put back a year.

There was continuing criticism of the new curriculum, primary school tests and league tables, and examinations. Teachers, writers and academics warned that the government's early years policies were damaging children's health and well-being. Gove's answer was even more testing – formal assessments for four- and five-year-olds.

In November 2013 Gove gave details of new GCSE syllabuses to come into force in September 2015, and Ofqual published arrangements for new GCSE examinations in mathematics and English to be set from 2017.

In April 2014 Gove announced new 'tougher' GCSEs and A levels with a stronger emphasis on mathematics skills and final examinations. Ofqual's decision to mark practical examinations separately in physics, chemistry and biology was criticised by science organisations.

Teachers

Industrial action over pay, pensions and working conditions continued with regional strikes in the autumn and national one-day strikes in March and July.

Universities were suspicious when Gove commissioned a review of teacher training, fearing that it might lead to further reductions.

The Trojan Horse Affair

In March 2014 the BBC reported that Birmingham City Council (BCC) and the DfE's Extremist Unit were investigating a letter, apparently sent to a contact in Bradford, which purported to set out details of 'Operation Trojan Horse', a plot to oust up to 16 Birmingham head teachers and make their schools more Islamic. The letter said parents should be told the schools were corrupting their children with sex education, teaching them about homosexuality and forcing them to say Christian prayers. 'Operation Trojan Horse has been very carefully thought through and is tried and tested within Birmingham', it said. 'Implementing it in Bradford will not be difficult for you.'

The BCC investigation found no evidence of links to extremism, but uncovered 'significant grievances' about school governance and leadership.

Wilshaw announced the findings of Ofsted's own inquiry in June. Five schools, including three academies run by the Park View Educational Trust, were placed in special measures. A sixth school was also labelled inadequate for its poor educational standards. Three schools were praised, but 12 would need to make improvements.

Ofsted recommended:

- mandatory training for governors;
- a review of the monitoring of the governance of free schools and academies;
- a review of whistle-blowing procedures;
- changes to funding agreements for academies and free schools; and
- an end to free schools' and academies' exemption from the national curriculum.

The report by the DfE's Extremist Unit said there was evidence of 'coordinated, deliberate and sustained action to introduce an intolerant and aggressive Islamist ethos into some schools in the city', and that there had been a 'sustained and coordinated agenda to impose upon children ... the segregationist attitudes and practices of a hardline and politicised strain of Sunni Islam'. The DfE was urged 'to review the process by which schools are able to convert to academy status and become multi-academy trusts' (*The Guardian*, 18 July 2014). In response, Gove said the government would require all schools to 'promote British values' and would back Ofsted's plan to introduce no-notice school inspections in England. In September, Ofsted inspectors revisited the five schools which had been placed in special measures and reported continuing concerns.

Conspiracy theorists suggested that the Trojan Horse letter had been a hoax. Whatever the truth of the matter, the affair had demonstrated that school governance was now out of control.

As the Trojan Horse affair reached its climax, Gove lost his job as education secretary in a cabinet reshuffle. The teacher unions said they hoped

for a more 'constructive relationship' with the new Secretary of State, Nicky Morgan.

2014-15. New Face – Same Old Policies

The Schools

Concerns about academies had been heightened by the Trojan Horse affair. Wilshaw said struggling schools were no better off in academy chains than under local authority control, and Liberal Democrat schools minister David Laws argued that councils should be given back their powers to intervene in struggling academies. But Morgan turned down Wilshaw's request for Ofsted to inspect academy chains.

Meanwhile, academies and free schools continued to cause problems:

- Ofsted accused AET of 'low expectations', with schools 'left to flounder';
- Hanson Academy in Bradford sent 200 pupils home for not wearing the correct uniform;
- the NAO reported that academy trusts had paid millions of pounds of public money to the private businesses of directors, trustees and relatives;
- Ofsted said primary schools were flourishing but progress in secondaries – most of which were now academies – had 'plateaued' and was in danger of going into reverse;
- DfE figures showed that in March 2014 the 4400 academies had cash reserves of £2.47 billion – more than all the remaining 18,700 local authority schools;
- a new free school in Brixton cost the taxpayer £18 million and had just 17 students;
- Durham Free School had its funding agreement terminated after being put in special measures; and
- Grindon Hall Christian free school in Sunderland was put in special measures.

Most tellingly, the CESC said the government's policies of encouraging schools to convert to academy status and establishing free schools had had little or no effect on raising school performance. Undeterred, Morgan said free schools were a huge success story, and Cameron promised to open five hundred more.

Cameron's announcement that state school spending in England would remain frozen at 2010 levels for at least four years was greeted with dismay by heads. In opposition, Cameron had warned his party to drop its obsession with grammar schools but now, under pressure from right-wing MPs, he supported the proposal by the Weald of Kent Grammar School in Tonbridge to open a campus in Sevenoaks. Home Secretary Theresa May endorsed a similar proposal in Maidenhead, and successful comprehensive schools in Gloucestershire were threatened by predatory grammar schools which were planning to increase their intakes by 25% from September 2016.

Lawyers said the new system for special educational needs provision, introduced by the 2014 Children and Families Act, was much more complicated than the previous statementing system.

New government rules making it easier to exclude pupils came into force at the start of 2015.

Curriculum and Assessment

The CESC called for sex education to be compulsory in all primary and secondary schools.

Morgan announced a ‘war on illiteracy and innumeracy’. Year six pupils would undergo new tests for times tables and writing, and if they didn’t pass, the leadership of their schools would be replaced. National Association of Head Teachers leader Russell Hobby commented: ‘This is pure electioneering, but the constant churn and bluster make any concerns expressed about tackling workload ring hollow. Apparently head teachers will be sacked should any – yes, any – child fail the test’ (Mason & Adams, 2015).

With new baseline assessments for reception infants due to start in September, children in England now faced official assessments in each of the first four years of their education.

Following Gove’s multiple changes, the proportion of pupils achieving five GCSE grades of C or above, including English and mathematics, fell from 59% in 2013 to 53% in 2014; the number of state schools failing to reach the government’s target more than doubled to 330; and the achievement gap between richer and poorer pupils widened for the first time in several years. An Ofqual survey revealed that four-fifths of heads had concerns about the grades students had been awarded at GCSE; two-thirds had concerns about A level grades.

Ofqual suddenly announced that the reformed AS and A levels in mathematics and further mathematics would be put back a year to 2017; that the new chemistry A level, which had been due to be taught from September 2015, had yet to be accredited; and that new AS and A levels in some other subjects would be scrapped. One head told *The Guardian*, ‘It’s chaotic. I wake up every morning and wonder what’s coming next’ (Weale, 2014).

Morgan abruptly terminated the funding of Gove’s A Levels Content Advisory Board, though the DfE insisted it still wanted universities to help reform A levels.

Teachers

At her first Tory party conference as education secretary, Morgan praised teachers and promised to reduce their workloads. While the tone of her speech was in marked contrast to Gove’s, critics pointed out that she had pledged to carry on all his controversial reforms.

Some 40% of teachers were now resigning in their first year; the shortage of candidates for head teacher posts was forcing schools into using recruitment agencies costing up to £50,000; and there were now 17,100 unqualified teachers in state-funded schools – a rise of 16% over the previous year, with the number in academies and free schools up by 50%.

General Election

Education was hardly mentioned during the election campaign. The Conservative Manifesto (three pages on education) proclaimed that the Tories would ‘turn every failing and coasting secondary school into an academy’ (p. 33); while the Labour Manifesto (two pages on education) promised to protect the education budget, ensure that every teacher was qualified, and ‘end the wasteful and poorly performing Free Schools programme’ (p. 38).

To the surprise of almost everyone – including, apparently, David Cameron – the Tories won the election with a Commons majority of 12.

Conclusions

The Conservatives were clearly proud of what they had achieved during the coalition period. Their manifesto for the 2015 election claimed:

We have brought high standards back to teaching, discipline back to schools, and challenging subjects back onto the curriculum. Today, there are a million more pupils in schools rated by Ofsted as ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’. Over a thousand schools that were ranked ‘inadequate’ have become Academies, bringing in new leadership to promote discipline, rigour and higher standards.

There are over 250 new free schools – set up and run by local people – delivering better education for the children who need it most. (p. 33)

These claims were dubious, to say the least. What can certainly be said is that the Coalition attempted to change just about every aspect of education in England, including:

- the destruction of local authorities as strategic planners and providers of education;
- the handing over of thousands of publicly owned schools to car salesmen, carpet manufacturers and faith groups;
- the creation of free school enclaves for the middle classes;
- the expansion of grammar schools;
- a new and controversial National Curriculum;
- changes to SATs (Standard Assessment Tasks) tests, league tables, GCSEs and A levels;
- the abolition of thousands of vocational courses and qualifications;
- a new system for special needs assessment and provision;

- fewer – and more expensive – places in higher education;
- a reduction in teacher training places;
- abolition of the requirement for teachers to be qualified; and
- changes to teachers' pay and conditions – scrapping the national pay scheme, imposing performance-related pay and diminishing pensions.

For the children, all this was set against a background of welfare cuts and rising poverty levels, exacerbated by a huge increase in levels of school-related anxiety, stress and mental health problems, particularly around examination times.

Teachers endured a constant barrage of demoralising criticism and denigration. By the end of the coalition period, teacher training was in chaos; there were warnings of a looming crisis in teacher supply; and schools were finding it difficult to appoint heads. Teaching itself had been undermined: anyone could do it – with or without training. For all their rhetoric about 'dedicated, hard-working and inspirational' teachers, ministers seemed determined to destroy teaching as a profession.

As to the curriculum, assessment and qualifications, the coalition period was marked by constant and incoherent change, U-turns and impossible timetables. Schools were bombarded with initiatives in almost every area, only to find them later scrapped or delayed. No wonder heads woke up in the morning and wondered what was coming next.

The claim that converting schools into academies had promoted 'discipline, rigour and higher standards' was simply not borne out by the evidence. Many academies – and academy chains – ran into problems and were severely criticised by Ofsted. Even the CESC could not decide whether academies were a positive force for change.

The free schools' policy was a disaster, with schools – at vast public expense – failing to open or opening with few pupils, using untrained teachers, being damned by Ofsted and then having their funding terminated. Given that their pupils were overwhelmingly from affluent middle-class families, the claim that free schools were 'delivering better education for the children who need it most' was simply extraordinary.

But perhaps most serious of all was the Coalition's destruction of local authorities. The national system of education set up by the 1944 Education Act – with its 'triangular' structure of central government, local government and the schools – provided checks and balances and democratic accountability. The Coalition's effective abolition of the middle tier and its attempt to control all schools from Whitehall led inevitably to inadequate oversight and ultimately to the Trojan Horse affair.

And what of Gove himself? It is tempting to characterise him as lumbering about like a bull in a china shop, smashing everything in sight. There is certainly plenty of evidence to support this view: his political ineptitude in going out of his way to offend the very people whose cooperation he needed; his arrogance in promoting policies which were often contradictory and rarely

based on evidence; his poor judgement in trying to change everything at once; his incompetence in managing what, under his leadership, became a dysfunctional department.

But it is also possible to see him as a shrewd operator whose clear aim was to complete the privatisation of education begun by Thatcher and promoted by Blair. In order to do this he needed to destroy what he disparagingly described as 'the blob' – the local authorities and their advisors, the teachers and their unions, the inspectorate, and the university training departments and their academics, historians and researchers – in other words, anyone who knew anything about education. In this view, his strategy of changing everything at once was a calculated one, designed to destabilise the entire edifice and so make it possible to build an alternative one based on neo-liberal policies and the principles of the global education reform movement.

The irony is that Gove himself is the perfect example of what happens when too much power is concentrated at the centre.

And now we have a Tory government, voted for by less than a quarter of the electorate. As a foretaste of what we can expect, in the first two months:

- Morgan presented her Education and Adoption Bill to the Commons, saying it would 'sweep away bureaucratic and legal loopholes' obstructing the rapid conversion of local authority schools into academies;
- Cameron, faced with an increase in child poverty for the first time in a decade, declared that the government would redefine poverty; and
- Osborne announced that students' maintenance grants would be replaced by loans for those starting in September 2016.

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