

Education

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The accelerating pace of educational reform since the 1988 Act quickened still further in the 2010-15 Parliament. There were three new acts, but also many of the powers acquired by previous acts were put to use. The heightened activity was partly because the programme had to embrace the ambitions of two parties. But the main impetus came from the new Secretary of State, Michael Gove, who in his three years shadowing the post had developed very clear ideas about what he wanted to achieve. In post, he pressed hard, anxious to embed as many of the desired changes as he could while he still held the reins.

Education was prominent in the 2010 manifestos of both the Conservative¹ and Liberal Democrat² parties. Both envisaged more freedom for schools and extra money to raise the attainment of pupils from low income families (the pupil premium). They also agreed on the need to improve the quality of teaching, proposing to increase school-led teacher training and expand the Teach First scheme³. But there were differences in emphasis with the Conservatives placing more on new schools, higher standards and improved discipline, while the Liberal Democrats stressed fairness.

Inevitably, with two parties in government there have had to be compromises, but in the field of education, given the similarity of the manifestos, it was relatively easy to reach agreement, with one notable exception. Some of the compromises resulted in an enhanced policy. The Liberal Democrats pushed the pupil premium higher up the agenda than it might have been, and the Conservatives were so pleased with it that they let it be thought it was their policy.

¹ The Conservative Manifesto 2010, *Invitation to Join the Government of Britain*,

² The Liberal Democrat Manifesto 2010, *Change that Works for You: building a fairer Britain*,

³ A scheme whereby top graduates from leading universities would teach in difficult schools for at least two years. See Brett Wigdortz, *Success Against the Odds: five lessons in how to achieve the impossible; the story of Teach First* (London: Short Books, 2012).

They were much less keen on Nick Clegg's free lunches for all infant school pupils⁴ which had to be afforded in a tightly constrained budget, with the additional expense of new kitchens. Some compromises proved unworkable. In the reform of the exams where the Conservative wish for greater rigour clashed with the Liberal Democrat pursuit of fairness, the initial compromise was to have tougher exams, but without tiers. This would have left more failing so was softened to allow some subjects, like maths, to retain tiers.

But one compromise proved difficult and disastrous. The Liberal Democrats had campaigned very vigorously on tuition fees. All their candidates signed and publicly paraded a National Union of Students' pledge to vote against any proposed increase. Labour as a potential coalition partner was ready to commit to this⁵. But the Conservatives stuck to their manifesto formula of 'considering carefully' the recommendations of the Browne Review⁶ convened by the outgoing Labour government. Since there had been an interim report in March 2010 it was no great surprise when in October 2010 the Review recommended freeing up universities to set their own fee levels. This delighted the Conservatives, but was lose-lose for the Liberal Democrats. A compromise was hammered out involving a maximum fee of £9,000, conditions that would apply to universities, and generous loans and repayment terms. Anticipating that a compromise on tuition fees would be extremely difficult, the partners, as part of the coalition agreement, accepted that Liberal Democrat MPs would be able to abstain in any vote. When it came to the point in early December 2010, twenty-eight of the fifty-seven Liberal Democrats, including Nick Clegg, voted for the new fee arrangements. Going back on such an explicit pledge seriously damaged the credibility of the Liberal Democrat party, which it has yet to recover. But, as we shall see in the section on higher education, the

⁴ DfE, Universal Infant Free School Meals, September 2014

⁵ Andrew Adonis, *5 Days in May; the coalition and beyond* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2013), p 184.

⁶ An Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education*, 12 October 2010.

compromise was also disastrous for the taxpayer, because the scheme saves very little and results in a large and uncertain charge on the public finances.

One of the first actions of the new government was to rename Michael Gove's department, the Department for Education (DfE), although, rather surprisingly, it did not re-designate its responsibilities. Gordon Brown on coming to office in 2007 had split higher education off from schools in his administration. It was an unfortunate separation cutting right across further education. It was made worse when the universities were shuffled into the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. If Conservative had gained a majority, higher education would have gone back into the DfE, but the move was blocked by the Liberal Democrat Secretary of State, Vince Cable. Under the arrangements which emerged, the DfE retained responsibility for children's services, which gave rise to tensions that that spread across party lines.

In the government's first major reshuffle two years into the parliament, both the Liberal Democrat children and families minister, Sarah Teather, and her Conservative junior, Tim Loughton, lost their jobs, along with the minister for schools, Nick Gibb. All three appeared before the Education Select Committee⁷ in January 2013. It was evident that Tim Loughton, who had shadowed the brief for nearly a decade and was highly respected in the field, was particularly upset. He said, 'it was difficult for the children and families agenda to get a look in, in the bulldozer that was the schools reform programme', and he accused the department of having 'an upstairs downstairs mentality'. Sarah Teather agreed that the Secretary of State was focused on schools reform, but said he 'had regularly "gone into bat" to support her in pushing forward changes in her area'. It emerged, however, that she had become very disillusioned with other aspects of government policy. In contrast, the third minister, Nick

⁷ Corrected Transcript of Oral Evidence taken before the Education Committee. *Former Department for Education Ministers* (HC 851-I, 16 January 2013)

Gibb was very relaxed about being asked to make way for the returning senior Liberal Democrat, David Laws, and so maintain the agreed balance in ministerial positions. He continued to be used by the government as a schools spokesman and returned to be an education minister in July 2014.

The three ministers were not the only early departures from the DfE. Four senior civil servants, including the permanent secretary, Sir David Bell, left during 2011. They all went to senior posts, with Sir David becoming vice chancellor of Reading University. But it was also reported⁸ that the secretary of state was not sorry to see them go because he had become frustrated by what he saw as passive resistance from officials, particularly at the junior level, close to the left-leaning education establishment. If Michael Gove sensed resistance in the department, little came from the Labour party. All through the 2010 Parliament they struggled to find a distinctive alternative narrative for schools. In truth, their 2010 manifesto proposals for education did not differ markedly from those that were agreed by the coalition. But there were also frequent changes of shadow secretary: Ed Balls lasted five months; Andy Burnham, a year; Stephen Twigg, two years; and the present incumbent, Tristram Hunt, nineteen months, if he survives to the end of the parliament. The coalition phased out or neutered a number of Labour's cherished schemes, including the Children's Plan, specialist schools, dedicated gifted and talented funding, careers advisors in schools, education maintenance allowances, and young apprenticeships, without much in the way of protest. The government also scrapped or merged a number of quangos, including in the field of education, the Teaching Council, the Training and Development Agency for Schools, the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, and the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency. Some of these functions were taken in house, literally into the headquarters in Great Smith Street, which became very crowded, with hot-desking

⁸ Jack Grimston, 'Gove at war with school mandarins', *The Sunday Times*, 16 October 2011.

the norm and few meeting spaces. These conditions may have contributed to the frenetic atmosphere as the reforms were driven forward.

The DfE provided a detailed statement of its far-reaching aims in a white paper⁹, *The Importance of Teaching*, in November 2010. In a joint foreword, David Cameron and Nick Clegg identified three main areas for action: raising the standards and status of teaching; ‘devolving as much power as possible to the front line, while retaining high levels of accountability’; and narrowing the vast gap in the educational performance of the rich and poor. All were taken forward, but it was the second of these, Autonomy and Accountability, that came to dominant.

⁹ Department for Education, *The Importance of Teaching: the schools white paper 2010* (London: The Stationery Office, Cmnd 7980, November 2010), pp 3-5.

Unfinished Business.

The Coalition government has left significant unfinished business. The shape of the future schools system is still unclear. Is it envisaged that all state schools will eventually become academies, and if so how will they be coordinated, regulated and administered? GCSEs and A-levels are being reformed on a very tight timetable with the risk of slippage as the details of what is involved are fully taken on board. The attention given to academic qualifications has meant that the reform of vocational qualifications is only just getting underway, and the flagship apprenticeship programmes are left without clear ladders to them from schools. There has been no real attempt to redesign education 14-18 to optimize the benefits of raising the participation age to 18. The switch from university-led to school-led teacher training runs the risk of teacher shortages in the short-term and with the training now so devolved it is harder to obtain the data to get the picture clear. The separation of higher education from school education in government departments has left further education neglected. We still await a Fair Funding Formula for distributing money equitably to schools. The finances of higher education will become an incubus for future governments if the student loan arrangements are not sorted out.

The Coalition embarked on the final year of the parliament with new people at the helm of education and higher education. On 14 July 2014 David Cameron began the reshuffling of his Conservatives ministers to form what, barring accidents, will be his line-up for the May 2015 election. Among the prominent casualties were Michael Gove and David Willetts. They had been the pivotal ministers in the government's drive to improve the education system. Of the two, David Willetts' departure was the more surprising. He had been a very popular science minister and if he was being blamed for the student loans disaster that is not entirely fair since he was only the minister of state and it was his boss, Vince Cable, who was

ultimately responsible. But Vince Cable is a Liberal Democrat in a post which under the coalition agreement is within the gift of the leader of his party.

Much less surprising, in retrospect, was the demotion of Michael Gove. Many supported his aims of better teachers, more freedom for the front line, better exams, a core rather than a prescriptive curriculum, and smarter accountability. But his increasingly pugilistic and mistrusting style alienated even those who wanted the same ends. So why did it all end like this?. Perhaps it was utter frustration at how long the changes were taking, Not realising how difficult it was to speed up some of the things for which he was asking, he seems to have interpreted the delays as subversive opposition. Perhaps he was fired up by advisers as passionate, or even more passionate, about the reforms. In particular, Dominic Cummings, the best known and most influential adviser on schools in fifty years, was verbally ferocious. He was contemptuous of those did not fully appreciate the ‘cultural revolution’ that they were bringing about. He is, on record, as having described the prime minister as ‘a sphinx without a riddle’¹⁰ and the deputy prime minister as ‘self-obsessed, sanctimonious and dishonest.’¹¹ If this was the atmosphere surrounding Michael Gove, it is not difficult to see where the overblown rhetoric might have come from. But as a highly successful former journalist Michael Gove must have realised how counterproductive it would be. His own emotions seem to have taken over. On the eve of the Queen’s speech in June 2014, he got into a very public spat with the Teresa May, the Home Secretary, over who was to blame for the failure to combat extremism in schools. An immediate inquiry by the cabinet secretary, Sir Jeremy Heywood, concluded that Michael Gove was to blame, and he was forced to issue an abject apology. David Cameron had had enough and, in July, asked his good friend to step down to become Chief Whip.

¹⁰ Ben Quinn, ‘Michael Gove ally Dominic Cummings in personal attack on David Cameron’, *The Guardian*, 16 June, 2014.

¹¹ Steven Swinford, ‘Nick Clegg is a ‘self-obsessed, revolting character’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 27 April 2014.

Gove's and Willetts' successors seem to have been asked to play mainly holding roles. The new minister for universities and science, Greg Clark, is keeping such a low profile that he remains almost unknown to the general public. But Nicky Morgan, Gove's replacement, was determined on a fresh start. She immediately had the permanent secretary sack Gove's then three special advisers¹² (Cummings had left in January 2014 but had still been a frequent visitor), although it might have been expected that at least one would be asked to stay on to smooth the transition. She has been out there battling to keep the reform agenda on course, but with some rebalancing. Between September 2014 and January 2015 she appeared four times before the Education Select Committee submitting to grillings from well-briefed MPs on extremism in schools, academies, exams, and careers, unusually without requiring the protection of the permanent secretary or junior ministers. The sessions revealed the enormity of the brief with which she has been coming to terms. But she has also wanted to set a different tone. In her speech to the Conservative Party Conference she announced a new £5 million fund to support innovative ideas to help schools and young people to develop character: 'For too long there has been a false choice between academic standards and activities that build character and resilience. But the two should go hand in hand.'¹³

In some ways the Coalition government has had an easy ride on education. It has been largely unchallenged by a Labour party which does not seem to have had a vision of its own. The opposition has contented itself with highlighting particular issues such as unqualified teachers, the decoupling of AS from A-levels, and the divide between state and private schools. The coalition has become increasingly confident that its education reforms will become enduring, not easily overturned by a future government, but there is still a lot of

¹² Steerpike, 'Nicky Morgan hides in office as civil servant sacks Gove's special advisers', *The Spectator*, 21 July 2014.

¹³ Nicky Morgan, *Speech to Conservative Party Conference 2014*, <http://press.conservatives.com/post/98807929855/nicky-morgan-speech-to-conservative-party>

unfinished business. Whichever government takes power in 2015 will still have a great deal to do to make England's education world class.