

NOSTRA CULPA

THE CURRENT EDUCATION SECRETARY IS NOT A PANTOMIME VILLAIN, WARNS PHIL BEADLE, AND WE RISK LETTING DOWN A GENERATION OR MORE IF WE CONTINUE TO TREAT HIM AS ONE...

Michael Gove has presented, and continues to present, a thorny issue for any left-leaning educator determined his feet should stay connected with the floor of reality, his head away from the clouds of pure ideology and his students in receipt of an education worthy of the name. No matter how personally irksome we may find Mr Gove's demeanour; how oily his plastered-on and overly tutored attempts to manifest charm; how hollow the ring of priestly over-assonance as it slides from the most manicured of mouths; he has been, undeniably to anyone with his eyes open, the most energetic, the most impassioned and, let's stop whispering this, the most important education secretary of the last twenty or so years.

While it is not unreasonable to put together an argument that the pace of structural reforms he has overseen has been anti democratic; that free schools, in particular, are merely a political device with which to force academisation, destroy collective pay bargaining, instate the profit motive and re-instate selection (watch this space if the Tories get another term); and that – prior to the debacle with the Al Madinah Free School – the relationship between the Secretary of State and the supposedly politically independent inspection regime is so cosy as to be guilty of the most tender of intimacies; you can also examine the reforms to the assessment and accountability regime and find them to have been utterly necessary.

Ignoring personal popularity within the education community, Gove has grasped nettles: he has attempted to confront the

literacy crisis that 'blinkerered' English teachers and out of touch academics argue does not exist; has dismissed corrupt forms of assessment (such as speaking and listening); has addressed the well intentioned nonsense of equivalences; has annihilated the culture of a thousand retakes per subject; and has been the person finally to place the near-arbitrary driver of the 5 A* – Cs benchmark – which has been responsible for millions of high and low attaining students receiving markedly less attention and unarguably a lower standard of teaching in key stage four than their middle achieving colleagues – into the bowl of acid it has always deserved.

Michael Gove has done an enormous amount of good for British education. And it is time the education community, and perhaps even the opposition, recognised this publicly. We should do this, first, because we are members of an honourable profession, who regard inculcating integrity and truth as a part of our job description. But, moreover, we should do this so that we may properly engage with arguments about the detail of reform without giving the current administration the chance of writing us off as 'enemies of progress'. Our knee-jerk expressions of sneering superiority and contempt are exactly what we accuse the other side of manifesting, and they have caused us to be largely impotent as a voice for modification in the pace or implementation of change.

If the education community presented itself in a more moderate way – if we argued with the detail of reforms rather than sticking out fingers in our ears and shouting personal insults, then it might be that we would be listened to, and that the impact on the running of schools and the lives of our students might be considered.

The recent decision that only one strike at the GCSE would count towards the league tables was well intentioned, but has caused chaos for schools and

students alike. The impact has been that hundreds of thousands of children have been preparing, in depth, for November exams, that they were not eventually allowed to take. The impact has been that students are now studying courses that were meant to take twenty months in only eight; coursework folders full of excellent work have been thrown in the bin; and a whole cohort of students now think that either one particular politician wants them to fail and has it in for them, or that their teachers are lying. This tragic chaos was avoidable, and is attributable to the Secretary of State's entirely indecent haste.

And so a plea. The disastrous implications of over-hastily cancelling 'retake culture' may have been our fault, as we were not considered worth listening to. The only thing we can really change is ourselves, and my feeling is that it is time to put the weapons down, engage with the detail, and start presenting ourselves as being a more moderate voice. If our reactions to policy changes and announcements (and certainly those voiced by our union leaders) were actually informed by what is best for our students, rather than by entrenched political bias, then – perhaps – the most important Education Secretary of the last twenty years might seek our guidance as to what will happen if policy is implemented too hastily.



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