

CASE AGM  
Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2023  
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*A bleak future or reasons for optimism?*

Good morning and thank you for asking me to speak. I am pretty sure that I will be preaching to the converted and I do wonder if there is anything new to say but I hope I can at least give an overview and perhaps add something a bit more controversial. I am working on the assumption that there will be a Labour government and engaging with them is our best chance for change.

My starting point may not be popular, but it is Michael Gove!! It may sound perverse, but can we learn anything from him – not of course his policies but the way he approached his role as Secretary of State for Education in 2010?

There is no doubt in my mind that, in his terms, he has been highly successful. Perhaps, sadly, more successful than even he had envisaged. I fear his greatest success may have been in changing the culture of our school landscape – being optimistic, this may be superficial but equally it may run quite deep. There is now a generation of schools and their leaders who have bought into his vision and importantly have considerable vested interests in retaining and developing it. The most obvious examples of this would be the CEOs of MATs but there are also many teachers who have known nothing different.

However, it is not just in the schools. We are now in the age of ‘influencers’ and there is no doubt that those who currently influence policy are ‘children’ of Gove and Gibb. We only need to look at Michaela or Oak or the leaders of the big MATs, Martyn Oliver our new HMCI, Rachel de Souza (Children’s Commissioner) or Tom Bennett or Ian Bauckham. I am not sure who Labour’s influencers will be but there are rumours out there that some of the current group, not surprisingly, are ready to jump ship as they see a probable Labour victory. If they do, they will bring with them considerable baggage.

Additionally, LAs have been decimated. I would not want to criticise individuals but working for an LA does not seem to hold the same attraction that it might have had 20 years ago – people like Tim Brighouse and Kevan Collins - when was the last time any of you heard of a successful school leader moving into an LA post? It used to happen!

When all of this is accompanied by the current degree of control from the DfE- think of mobile phones or much more seriously the curriculum and pedagogy - and from MATs - think of the recent example of the Astrea MAT telling teachers how to position desks and even litter bins in their classrooms – we have schools, ironically, with much less autonomy than before and LAs with responsibilities but without resources or power. There is a huge and dangerous concentration of power and control at the centre.

There is a litany of issues that an incoming government will face - SEND, Initial Teacher Education, OFSTED, the narrow curriculum driven by EBACC, testing of children at every stage, attendance, the attainment gap, mental health, zero tolerance behaviour policy, governance and structures and the long standing issues of selection and independent schools - but you are aware of all of these.

However, returning briefly to Gove. Again, only in his terms, why has he been so successful? The answer is not simple, but I think there are a few key points that bear looking at, from which there may be learning. Firstly, he had done his homework, his preparation. He came into post knowing what he wanted to do - for example, within just weeks he had his academisation plans in place. Secondly, he utilised what was already there – Labour had invented Academies for a specific purpose, but he saw how to exploit the potential of the concept. Thirdly he had a holistic view of the system and understood how the bits fitted together. And fourthly he could see quick wins that cost little but indicated the direction of travel such as the focus on the knowledge-based curriculum.

Given all of this it would be easy to be depressed about the future of education in England but there are reasons to be positive largely because I believe, or at least hope, as I indicated earlier, that some of this cultural shift is superficial. There are many individuals and many groups, like yourselves, who not only reject much of what has happened in the last 13 years but also have ideas as to how the system can be changed and improved. Most importantly there are significant numbers of professionals both in schools and HE who still have a much broader view of what education should be and who came into the profession determined to make a difference. We have some of the best teachers in the world employing outstanding pedagogy – when they are allowed to.

But will the Labour Party or the LibDems have the courage to go beyond the risk-free options and the tweaking that Labour are currently advocating. Time is limited if we are to learn from Gove and if Labour are going to come into

power with some well-developed plans. Currently as in most aspects of their policymaking, they seem to be playing safe. Some changes to OFSTED, breakfast for primary pupils etc. Is this caution conducive to developing a vision? Or is it fear?

We need more than this and the young people in our schools deserve more than this. They deserve change to a system that celebrates every child's achievements and provides great opportunities for all our young people. A note of caution here – schools over the last 30 years have experienced continual change and we need to be very careful to take teachers with us and not alienate them – especially with curriculum change.

What would I see as the key priorities? I would divide them into several groups in the light of my comment about change – those that would be broadly welcomed and could be relatively easily implemented; those that are urgent but have a cost; and those that require a longer timeframe and greater consultation. We continually come up against the 5-year political cycle, but Labour has to plan for two terms in power and be prepared to do some longer-term planning.

Labour is committed to costing everything so looking at the short term what could be done with limited funding – the quick wins.

- The obvious first candidate is already on their agenda - OFSTED – and the abolition of headline grades will probably feature in their manifesto. However, a major overall review could be set up immediately at virtually no cost – we need to revisit the purpose of inspection. The original legislation did not set out to improve schools but to provide independent, impartial judgements of schools **and also hold Government to account**. They are supposed to be independent of government not an arm of the DfE.
- Similarly, a decision could be taken on coming into office to reverse immediately the accreditation policy for teacher education and allow training providers that were excluded to return to provision.
- They could also advocate a more diverse curriculum for teacher education that does not rely so heavily on one ideological position. We need to stop the nonsense of DfE officials being sent out to check that providers are following the programme that they had to agree to, to get accreditation.

- They could either abolish EBACC or at the very least expand it to include technology and creative subjects.
- There is some support for T-Levels but there would be massive support for confirming the importance of all BTECs and retaining them.
- They could abolish national testing of 7-year-olds and possibly 11-year-olds.
- Although a way forward for the middle tier and structural change is longer term, imposing a pause to further academisation would be straightforward.

Then there are the very urgent issues that require funding.

- Possibly the most important of these is SEND. At present LAs cannot meet the demand and unless there is recognition of this there will be huge damage done to thousands of children and many more bankrupt LAs
- Attendance and Mental Health which both require not just funding but a programme to train professionals.

The final group is those that are about creating a better and more relevant education system in the long run. Planning for these needs to be initiated now but schools need to know that they are long term and will require consultation and planning.

- The exam system. Baccalaureate/GCSE/A levels. Don't forget Tomlinson.
- The curriculum. Schools may throw up their hands, but we need a broader offer.
- Early years. We need to make this part of the national infrastructure not profit making and we need higher qualifications for those working in the sector.
- Review the balance between national and local responsibility. We need to give greater control of education back to local communities.

In addition, there is a huge problem not only with recruiting teachers but also retaining them. Addressing this as a discrete issue is not the answer. Changing the culture is. Addressing these major issues would not only have their own benefits but would also go a long way to returning teaching to being a profession.

As I have already indicated you are familiar with these issues so I would like to focus on a different kind of 'cultural' issue, one that I think needs to be put out there and addressed that goes deeper, an idea that is embedded in all our educational thinking and is subscribed to by all political parties and everyone in education– **increasing social mobility by closing the attainment gap**. I preface what I am going to say by giving you again my credentials – I was headteacher of a school in TH that had significant success in raising attainment and after retiring from that I was the Welsh Government's key advisor for 5 years on 'closing the gap'.

**This gap cannot be closed – in fact even narrowing it is incredibly difficult. We need to stop pretending that it can be closed.** We have had Pupil Premium for 13 years and virtually nothing has changed – in fact the gap has widened slightly. Every school I know has put huge efforts into supporting young people from less advantaged backgrounds, and I mean huge ..... Why has nothing changed? There is the obvious reason that is persistently ignored by politicians and the media - schools cannot compensate for all the disadvantages that come with poverty - but crucially even if they could, **the exam system does not allow it.**

Technically of course at GCSE no-one fails – or at least, as originally envisaged only U grades were failures. But as a nation we cannot resist the concept of success and failure and at GCSE this is currently based around the achieving level 4s and 5s especially in English and Maths. Of course, this is then used to measure and judge schools. Measuring progress is better than simply looking at attainment - but who would design a measure, Progress 8, where 50% of schools every year achieve a negative score.

We always hear percentages and fractions but sometimes numbers are more important. Approximately 30% of pupils at GCSE 'fail'. ASCL talks of the forgotten third. But if we look at numbers instead, since 2010 more than 2,000,000 young people have 'failed' using the current measure. There are 92 football stadiums of all 4 leagues of English football. We could fill them all with these young people who are deemed to have failed. Why are we obsessed with the 45% who go to HE and not the 55% who don't.

I would love to see the end of GCSEs and a move to the kind of Diploma that Tomlinson recommended in 2003 and I think we will eventually, but that will take time. (The Testing Charade, Daniel Koretz) In the meantime approximately 160000 pupils will 'fail' every year. We could stop immediately this obsession

with the 3/4 boundary and the measures that go with it and say, for example that every grade except U is a pass. We could then see grades as an indicator for all pupils that would determine/suggest what they do at 16-18 not as a pass/fail measure and a way to judge schools. We would then crucially shift resources and prioritise investment in FE providing high quality opportunities for all but in particular the forgotten third. We could stop seeing these young people as failures.

It is for me the elephant in the room. It suits every politician, the media and the world at large to carry on believing that there is a school shaped solution to social mobility. **There is not.** Of course, schools have an important role to play but it is a massive convenience to deposit this responsibility for social mobility, along of course with many others, on schools. "If only schools were better, and pupils worked harder all our problems would be solved." The schools are doing everything they can, and the pupils are working hard but 30% still 'fail'. Every initiative that we have seen over the last 40 years is predicated on the notion that if only we could find the right silver bullet the problem would be solved. Organisations like the EEF do a good job in highlighting improvements in pedagogy but achieving the desired outcome is impossible. This is, I think, a huge confidence trick. It diverts attention from the real issues.

Crucially I am **not** suggesting that schools should give up on enabling more pupils from less advantaged backgrounds to be successful. Of course not. Our teachers will undoubtedly continue to do this - as they currently do. Equally I am not for a minute suggesting that HE is for the middle class and FE for the working class. This is not a question of either/or. **We can do both.**

So where does this leave us? I think all of us with our different but overlapping agendas need to use all our available resources to gain access to the Labour Party. We need to persuade them that there is so much that education could do to create a fairer and more equal society. Minor changes to the current system will not be enough – this fails to see the connectivity and interdependence of the various elements. They need to see that there are things that could be addressed more or less immediately at little cost and that would lay down a marker indicating that they have a vision. But also, they need to set in motion the research and planning to address the more fundamental issues. They badly need a vision. Do they have one? Caution, fear and tweaking will not compensate for the lack of a vision. Gove had one. We need a better one.