

EDUCATION REVIEW 2013: MICHAEL GOVE PROMOTES ‘TRADITIONAL’ SCHOOLS

Schools: Michael Gove forged on with his plan to return to the good old days, and called his critics the ‘enemies of promise’

2013 was the year when the education minister was compelled to resign. Unfortunately – from the viewpoint of many teachers in England – it was the Welsh education minister, Leighton Andrews, who left office after he carried a banner in support of a primary school in his constituency that faced closure because of his own policies. East of Offa’s Dyke, Michael Gove showed no sign of flagging, still less resigning.

In January, MPs warned he was “trying to do too much too quickly”. But though the education secretary gave a little ground to his critics, plans for a new regime at both A-level and GCSE, to start in 2015 with the first exams in 2017, stayed firmly in place. GCSE would have a new grading structure based on numbers rather than letters. There would also be fewer re-sits, fewer tiered papers for pupils

of different abilities and no more “bite-sized modules”. In other words, traditional written exams, externally marked, were back, as though the past 50 years in English schools had never happened. One of Gove’s few concessions was to permit that school-based assessment would still be allowed, though “kept to a minimum”.

It was somehow characteristic of the English approach to school “reform” that the biggest remaining argument at the year’s end was what to call the new exams. Gove dropped the title English Baccalaureate Certificates – making EBC the shortest-lived acronym in education history – and said they would remain as GCSEs, presumably to signify that, though standards would be tougher, the exams would still be “inclusive” and not, as his original proposals suggested, exclude the bottom 40%. Wales, however, intended to keep the old-style GCSE, so that pupils in different parts of the UK would hold different qualifications with the same name.



In advance of the new-style GCSE, the exams regulator, Ofqual, clamped down on the “grade inflation” that it said was damaging public confidence. The numbers getting top grades in A-levels and GCSEs fell for the second year running. But in a new example of schools gaming the system, the number of pupils taking International GCSEs soared. Many teachers thought the IGCSE easier but, even if it wasn’t, taking both exams gave a child two chances of a high grade.

Gove also went ahead with Spag (spelling and grammar) tests for 11-year-olds. A strange proposal, announced by the deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg, that year 6 children should be placed in ability deciles (10% bands) to provide “clarity” for parents appeared to go nowhere.

Gove further advanced his ambitions to return schools to the good old days with a new national curriculum that emphasised rigour, knowledge and the three Rs. Again, he made small concessions: for example, Mary Seacole, the black woman who cared for Crimean War soldiers and who was initially dropped from the curriculum, was restored. But when a letter to two national newspapers, signed by 100 education academics, warned that his “endless lists of spellings, facts and rules” could “severely erode educational standards”, Gove called them “enemies of promise”.

Academies and free schools received less attention than in previous years, but continued to grow. Free school numbers doubled to 174 while 653 primary schools, 207 secondaries, four all-through schools and 50 special schools and referral units became academies during the year’s first 11 months. Some established ones ran into trouble. Seven sponsored academies were warned they must improve and an academy in Carlisle was placed in special measures for the second time in four years. E-Act, a chain that runs 31 academies, was reprimanded by the Education Funding Agency for “a culture involving prestige

venues, large drinks bills, business lunches and first-class travel”. Its director-general, Sir Bruce Liddington, who once aspired to a “super-chain” of 250 academies, resigned. Al-Madinah, a free school in Derby, received a scathing Ofsted report, while an education department investigation found accounting irregularities.

Labour, which started opening academies while in office and expressed sympathy for the idea of free schools, could make little political capital out of these travails. Its policies and how they differed from Gove’s were opaque. When Education Guardian suggested to Stephen Twigg, then shadow education secretary, that his criticisms of Gove were too nuanced to grip public attention, he cheerfully replied “I plead guilty to nuance”. Nine months later, he was removed from the front bench. His replacement, Tristram Hunt, immediately disappointed those who hoped for more vigorous opposition. He wouldn’t shut down free schools, he said, or put them under local authorities. On the contrary, Labour would open new ones, calling them “parent-led academies”.

However, Hunt did prove more pro-active and media-savvy than Twigg when the triennial international Pisa tests of 15-year-olds showed the UK no better than average in reading, science and maths. Two days before the results were published, Hunt grabbed newspaper space to argue that they showed the ineffectiveness of Gove’s policies. Gove pointed out that pupils who sat the tests in 2012 received all but two years of their schooling under Labour. He went on to draw his own partisan lessons, but at least Hunt got his retaliation in first.

2013 showed that Gove’s conviction, determination and gifts for propaganda make him a formidable minister. Hunt gave a glimmer of hope that Labour could offer serious opposition. But there was no hope at all that Gove would follow the example of Leighton Andrews.