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MICHAEL GOVE 2010–2014

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ABSTRACT

The article provides an overview of the extensive and fast-moving reforms initiated by Michael Gove as the Secretary of State for Education in the years 2010–2014. These include the rapid acceleration of the academisation programme and the development of free schools.

There is a more extensive exploration of the reform of the curriculum and the reformation of examination structures. This latter review is set in the context of university advice and against the backdrop of international performance.

Much of the focus of the article considers the implementation of the intentions of a minster who had been in waiting for three years before taking office. However, consideration is also given to the unexpected, yet significant, issues which intersect a politician's tenure of office. The Birmingham based 'Trojan Horse Schools' situation is considered both as an issue of accountability but also its implications for the nature of schooling, state funding and societal values.

INTRODUCTION

When Michael Gove became Secretary of State for Education in 2010 he had already been Shadow Secretary for three years and his plans were clear. His problem was that the Tories did not have a majority and the Lib-Dem partners in the coalition were notoriously interested in education. Gove wanted to move quickly to reform all aspects of school education and he needed a fixer who would manage the Lib-Dems. He chose a little-known man called Dominic Cummings.

In his infamous blogs Cummings describes the battles he had with civil servants and Lib-Dem ministers (including Nick Clegg), battles to which he brought an unusual element of ruthlessness. It was this behaviour which caused the Prime Minister, David Cameron, to describe him as 'a career psychopath'. But without Cummings the scale of educational reform, all in place within four years, would not have been achieved.

The General Election was held on 6 May 2010. Gove's White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, was published in November – Cummings had done well.

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There were two driving principles which lay behind the many plans outlined in the White Paper:

***as a country our educational standards were slipping behind other advanced countries, especially East Asia. This was going to be very damaging to us in the long run.**

> *"In Massachusetts in the USA 16 year-olds are asked in their science exams to identify the shape of a carbon tetrabromide molecule as predicted by the valence-shell repulsion theory. In England sixteen year olds are asked in their science exams whether we sweat through our lungs or our skin." (Michael Gove speech, October 2010).*

***disadvantaged pupils were being let down by state schools. They could benefit from a more demanding, academic curriculum and social justice required that this should happen.**

In 2010, the country was in the middle of a serious recession and he had to cut spending, not increase it.

Education policy is devolved in the UK and so Gove's policies only applied in England.

PLAN 1: ACADEMISATION

Academies are simply state comprehensive schools run by governors independent of local authorities. They began with the Education Reform Act 1988 under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher with Ken Baker as the Secretary of State. The basic belief was that local authorities, who had run schools since the war, were incompetent and in many cases left-leaning in their approach to education. The 1988 Act created ways for schools to opt out of local authority control: City Technology Colleges, Grant-Maintained schools and local management of schools (LMS). Financial control shifted from local authorities to the schools themselves, their funding being provided by central government.

After the election of Tony Blair in 1997 there was some rowing back on school autonomy, but in due course this was reversed after Andrew Adonis became a Minister in 2005. By dint of little more than a personal crusade he managed to find sponsors for 200 or so failing state schools to become Academies free from local authority control.

It was this policy that was given rocket-boosters by Gove. The Academies Act 2010 was one of the first pieces of legislation passed by the new government. It

made it possible for all state schools in England to become Academies, still publicly funded but with a vastly increased degree of autonomy in issues such as setting teachers' pay and diverging from the National Curriculum. All schools graded Outstanding by Ofqual would be fast-tracked to academy status if they wished.

Many did.

There are two types of Academy – *sponsored Academies* which had been doing badly and are handed-over to a government-approved sponsor – and *converter Academies* which are good schools that choose to convert to academy status.

By April 2011, the number of Academies had increased to 629. This year it stands at 9,200, 36% of primary schools and 78% of secondaries.

Over time, some Academies were more successful than others. The more successful were encouraged to take over other schools and work as Multi-Academy Trusts, which had the benefit of spreading good practice and achieving economies of scale.

The number of Academies grew so fast that central government soon realised that they could not manage them well. This fact led to the creation of a network of Regional Schools Commissioners, each responsible for the organisation and standards of schools in their patch.

Has academisation been a success?

Yes, in terms of the large number of schools who have opted for it.

Yes, for many of the weak sponsored Academies who improved after they gained autonomy.

Between August 2010 and March 2019 the proportion of pupils in England in schools graded Good or Outstanding by Ofsted rose from 66% to 85%. In 2019 73% of sponsored Academies (ie schools which had been poor) were graded Good or Outstanding (Department for Education, 2019).

But on the other side of the argument, many of the remaining local-authority schools (called 'maintained schools') are doing just as well as the Academies.

And the autonomy that schools expected when they became Academies has been lost as they find themselves under a high degree of control by MATs.

PLAN 2: FREE SCHOOLS

The idea of free schools was based on similar systems in Sweden and the USA (in America they are called charter schools). Free schools are state comprehensive Academies, indistinguishable from other Academies except in the way they are set up. A free school is a new school set up by an individual, group or local authority who can prove to the Department for Education that they have a level of

educational expertise and that there is demand for their type of proposed school in the area concerned.

I helped set up one of the first free schools, the London Academy of Excellence in Newham, east London. We got the go-ahead in 2012. The school is a sixth-form college backed by six independent schools, each of which agreed to support one or more A-level subjects by providing experienced staff. Sometimes these staff were seconded to the school for a whole year, sometimes they simply visited the school every few weeks.

There are now over 500 free schools. Inevitably, some have been more successful than others. Some failed to attract pupils and closed. But on average their exam results have been better than other state schools and several have been outstanding. My school managed to find 200 pupils in the first year (quite something given that the school had no track record and the building was not finished). This year it had 4000 applicants for 250 places, the average A-level grade was A and 33 pupils went on to Oxford and Cambridge – more than most independent schools. This school helped transform the educational prospects for bright children in Newham.

Several free schools have generated worthwhile innovation, such as the behaviour and academic standards set by Michaela School in Wembley, or the focus on oracy of School 21 in Newham.

PLAN 3: EXAM REFORM

In order to raise the bar in terms of what pupils know the school exam system in England was reformed. There were several elements to this reform.

Curriculum

In primary schools the thing which matters most is teaching children to read. Michael Gove and Nick Gibb were convinced by evidence from good schools that the phonics method of teaching was by far the most effective but many primary schools were still not using it.

Phonics is a way of teaching children to read quickly and skilfully. They are taught how to recognise the sounds that each individual letter makes and identify the sounds that different combinations of letters make – such as ‘sh’ or ‘oo’, then blend these sounds together from left to right to make a word. Children can use this knowledge to ‘de-code’ new words they hear or see.

So in 2012 Gove introduced the Year 1 Phonics Check as a way of nudging schools to adopt phonics methods. By 2015 the proportion of 6-year-olds achieving the expected standard of reading had risen by 19 percentage points since 2012 to 77%, equivalent to 120,000 more children doing well.

Gove and his Schools' Minister Nick Gibb were much influenced by the work of E D Hirsch in America. E. D. Hirsch had discovered from his own teaching at the University of Virginia that students could only reach a high level of understanding and analytical thinking if they knew what might be called 'basic facts' about a topic. The notion that pupils could learn to think intelligently about a subject if they did know a lot about it was clearly nonsense. Having established this, Hirsch set about writing a core knowledge curriculum – a list of things which he believed all American children needed to know (Hirsch, 1987). This was the basis of the idea behind a knowledge-rich curriculum that many of the best schools in England now aspire to.

Gove and Gibb agreed that pupils could know much more than they do, including these 'facts' which necessarily which lie behind analytical thinking. You cannot think about a subject if you do not know a reasonable amount about it.

Step one was to reform the National Curriculum. Gove appointed Tim Oates, Group Director of Assessment Research & Development at Cambridge Assessment, to lead this project in 2011. Oates simplified the National Curriculum for children aged 5–14 and raised the bar in several respects.

> *'The National Curriculum should embody rigour and high standards and create coherence in what is taught in schools, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to acquire a core of knowledge in the key subject disciplines.'* (National Curriculum Review, 2011).

Step two was to write the syllabuses for each GCSE subject. Groups of subject-specialists, including many experienced teachers, were gathered for meetings in the Department for Education, each chaired by a civil servant. Over a period of months they thrashed out the basic GCSE content which was then translated by the exam boards into exam syllabuses.

In the case of GCSEs there was a general policy of raising standards but a specific policy of raising the level of required maths knowledge. It was in the subject of mathematics that England was particularly weak compared to East Asia. When I recruited Hong Kong boys into the sixth form at Harrow I found that they were generally two years ahead of their English counterparts. So it should be no surprise that mathematics GCSE was made significantly harder by Gove. Subjects such as geography, physics, chemistry, biology and design technology contain more maths.

Step three was to rewrite the core content for each A-level subject. This job was done by groups of university academics assisted by school teachers – the A-level Content Advisory Boards (ALCAB). These, too, were then translated into exam syllabuses by the exam boards. All A-level syllabuses were rewritten so that

they were a better preparation for university degree courses. Universities should no longer be able to complain that students came up to university unprepared. The modern linguists produced a syllabus which included more literature and more about the culture of the country whose language was being studied. In maths the syllabus was arranged so that all students took the same papers rather than choosing from options – something which had been a nuisance for universities.

The reform of the curriculum was made more difficult, more controversial, by Gove's own rather personal statements about what he believed should be taught. There were two areas of the curriculum where this was the case – secondary English and the entire history curriculum. In English he advocated teaching *"the great tradition of our literature – Dryden, Pope, Swift, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Austen, Dickens and Hardy – should be at the heart of school life."* (speech, October 2010).

In history the problem was his focus on the history of Britain alone and his insistence on a chronological approach to the subject, starting with the Stone Age and working slowly through to the twentieth century by Key Stage 3. There was a significant focus on facts, what Simon Schama called a 'ridiculous shopping list'.

The disputes which followed might have been avoided if Gove had left it to the expert groups of teachers that ultimately helped write the National Curriculum; by expressing his personal preferences he alienated teachers who rightly objected to a Secretary of State dictating what children should learn.

The EBacc and Progress 8

The Russell Group of 24 leading universities produced a guide for schools in which they stated that some A-level subjects are more useful than others if you want to keep your options open in terms of admission to Russell Group universities. These so-called facilitating subjects were maths, further maths, physics, chemistry, biology, modern and ancient languages, English literature, geography, history, philosophy and ethics.

Gove was concerned that increasing numbers of pupils were studying non-facilitating subjects and this was especially true of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. In order to influence this, he created a new performance table measure called the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) which gives the proportion of a school's students passing GCSEs in English, maths, sciences, history or geography and a language.

In 2010, just 22% of state school pupils were entered for the EBacc subjects and only 15% achieved passed them all. GCSE results in 2016 showed those proportions had risen to 39.7% and 24.7% respectively. So this was a remarkable

Why Gove loves mathematics: speech given in March 2010

"The most influential language on earth is not English, or Mandarin but maths. Mathematics is the means by which we make sense not just of the natural world around us but also lay the ground for discoveries yet to come.

The Pythagorean revolution was prelude to the astonishing flowering of classical philosophy which laid the foundations of the Western world. Galileo recognised that it was through mastery of mathematics that the music of the spheres could be heard by man, and the shape of the earth made real. The thrilling breakthroughs he and his contemporaries made helped mankind move from an age of superstition to the rule of reason.

The Enlightenment, mankind's great period of intellectual flowering, the liberation from ignorance on which our current freedoms rest, was made possible by the work of mathematicians like Leibniz and Newton.

Gauss, the prince of mathematicians, called maths 'the queen of the sciences.' Why? Because of what Wigner famously called 'the unreasonable effectiveness of maths' – the miracle whereby pure maths can, sometimes centuries later, find practical applications never originally dreamed of, and the way in which a mathematical formulation of a physical principle leads to extraordinarily precise descriptions and predictions.

Our economic future depends on stimulating innovation, developing technological breakthroughs, making connections between scientific disciplines. And none of that is possible without ensuring more and more of our young people are mathematically literate and mathematically confident.

Mathematical understanding underpins science and engineering, and it is the foundation of technological and economic progress. As information technology, computer science, modelling and simulation become integral to an ever-increasing group of industries, the importance of maths grows and grows." (Gove speeches, 2010).

example of a performance table tweak having a huge effect on what was being taught in English schools.

A further measure, called Progress 8, was introduced for schools in 2016 based on students' progress between age 11 and 16 measured across eight subjects:

English; mathematics; three other EBacc subjects (chosen from sciences, computer science, geography, history and languages); and three further subjects.

The EBacc was given extra punch when the floor standard (the standard a school had to reach if it was to avoid intervention by the Department for Education) was based on schools' results on the Progress 8 measure. The EBacc performance measure was a nudge. Progress 8 was really compulsion.

Exam structures

Ofqual (the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation) was set up in 2010. In 2011 Gove and Ofqual announced their hostility to modules. Modules are independently graded exam papers which at that time were sat in January and June. If an A-level was divided into six modules, students could sit one or more modules in January of Year 12, and then sit them again in the in the summer of Year 12, January of Year 13 and summer of Year 13 – so four shots at it. This made A-levels easier and generated massive grade inflation.

Another problem was that it is impossible to grade fairly if there are many routes to one qualification through modules. In any one year exam boards were being asked to rank students some of whom had taken all the modules in one sitting, others of whom had spread them out over two years. So by the end of the course, some had taken a module once, others had taken it four times.

Gove also expressed his concern about coursework. Some was never moderated (ie checked by an independent person) including the crucial English GCSE speaking and listening module. When asked, teachers admitted to Ofqual that they had been under pressure to influence their pupils' results.

With exams you normally like to have a range of marks so that everyone doesn't get the same grade. But coursework marks were often bunched at the top end of the scale – which meant that the coursework did not contribute to the necessary range at all.

Further analysis by Ofqual revealed that much coursework didn't measure what it claimed to. For example, fieldwork in geography was supposed to measure the ability to collect and analyse data but in fact it measured little more than an ability to follow instructions given by the teacher. Coursework in GCSE mathematics and science was felt by most teachers to be of limited value and burdensome to administer.

At the same time employers and universities were complaining about the quality of their 18-year-old employees and undergraduates: their English and maths were poor, they lacked initiative and they appeared to have gained good exam results by spoon-feeding. Gove shared this concern about low standards, about the way in which pupils were stacking up marks by taking modules every six months over a two-year period, and the generally low level of some syllabuses.

There was another concern about A-levels: the content of modules taken in Year 12 was long forgotten by the time the students arrived at university. The modular system meant that at no point did students know the whole syllabus.

So between 2011 and 2015 a number of decisions were taken by Gove that amounted to a radical shake-up of the whole system:

1. He scrapped January exam sittings so halving the number of times a pupil could sit exams.
2. He scrapped modules. The AS-level exam was decoupled from the A-level so that the A-level was now linear – all A-level papers are sat in one go at the end of the course.
3. He told schools that the first sitting of a GCSE would be the only one which would count for performance table measures. This discouraged early and multiple sittings of an exam.

These three measures have together greatly reduced the burden of exams, something which is rarely acknowledged. The volume of exams has been reduced, as has the amount of time devoted to preparing for exams and actually sitting exams. Most teachers regard this as a good development.

4. In English GCSE the speaking and listening would no longer count towards the main grade (but it would be reported as a separate grade).
5. Coursework was scrapped in all public exams unless it measured something important that could not be measured by an exam. In A-level sciences the only element of practical work now assessed by the teacher is the student's ability to select the right equipment, use that equipment and log the results. At GCSE and A-level the results and meaning of the experiments are assessed in the written exam with questions worth 15% of the total marks.

	GCSE		**A-level**	
	Previous coursework weighting	Reformed weighting %	Previous coursework weighting	Reformed weighting %
English lit.	25	0	40	20
History	25	0	15–20	20
Physics	25	0	20–30	0
French	60	25	30–40	30
Drama	60	60	40–70	60

In 2011 I was sent by the Independent Schools Council to present Michael Gove with a list of our collective suggestions. It was pleasing to us that every one

of those ideas was implemented (not of course because of our wish-list). Only one policy change was made that we did not initially agree with – the decoupling of AS-levels – but even that, in retrospect, does not seem to have been a totally bad move.

Vocational qualifications

Gove was concerned that schools and colleges were encouraging pupils to take subjects which were of little value to universities or employees. The 2011 Wolf Report, written by Professor Alison Wolf from King's College London, found that thousands of vocational qualifications taken by young people were a 'negative qualification' – in other words they actually harmed a pupil's prospects of going to university or gaining a job.

In response to her findings the Gove removed funding from these courses and reduced the incentives which had encouraged schools to offer vocational alternatives to GCSEs: in government league tables there had been a raft of generous 'equivalences' where, for example, a vocational ICT course was worth the equivalent of four GCSEs. These equivalences were often far easier than the GCSEs they were supposed to be the equivalent of. They were reined back after the Wolf Report.

British values

Ministers sometimes have to deal with events. In late November 2013, a document that has since come to be known as the 'Trojan Horse' letter was received by Birmingham City Council. The letter was incomplete, with no addressee and no signature. It was supposedly written to an unnamed person in Bradford, describing a strategy to take over a number of schools in Birmingham and run them on strict Islamic principles. The letter states that: *'Operation Trojan Horse' has been very carefully thought through and is tried and tested within Birmingham'*.

In 2014 Peter Clarke, the former anti-terrorism officer, was appointed by Gove to investigate claims that a number of schools in Birmingham had indeed been taken over by a fundamentalist Islamic group.

His review found that one of the schools had been funding a madrassa from its own budget, while at another Muslim children had been taken on trips to Saudi Arabia. A third school regularly broadcast a call to Muslim prayer over the school's loudspeaker in the playground while another school taught in biology that "evolution is not what we believe" (Clarke, 2014).

Gove responded by announcing that from September 2014 all schools, independent schools, academies and free schools, and all local authority-run schools, were required "actively to promote fundamental British values". Gove also announced that teachers will be banned from the profession if they allow extremists into classrooms.

New clauses were added into funding agreements for academies, stating that the Secretary for Education could close schools whose governors do not comply with "fundamental British values." Guidance to schools defined these as democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.

Teaching British values has had a mixed reception but there is surely little doubt that by swift action a potentially serious problem was nipped in the bud.

Cutting Building Schools for the Future

Gordon Brown had embarked on an expensive programme of school rebuilding. The financial crisis after 2018 made this unsustainable and Gove cut the programme as soon as he took office. Projects which had not achieved the status of 'financial close' would not proceed, meaning that 715 school revamps already signed up to the scheme did not go ahead.

Gove was criticised by a judicial review for his failure to consult before imposing the cuts, but the cuts went ahead all the same. It was a very unwelcome development for the many schools expecting a rebuild but an inevitable step at a time when all government departments were expected to find savings.

Cutting the City Challenge: a mistake

The London Challenge was a school improvement programme launched by the Labour Government in 2003 and designed to create a "step change" in the performance of London secondary schools. The scheme was later extended to primary schools.

In the London Challenge, managed by the Department for Education, the exam results of socially similar schools in London were compared and this made it possible to challenge underperformance on the compelling grounds that if other schools were doing much better with a similar intake of students, significant improvement was possible.

The use of data generated both optimism and urgency about the need for change. An important element was buy-in by schools, driven by a moral imperative to improve the results for disadvantaged pupils. Improvement work was to be done with them, not to them.

The focus was on training existing teachers to be more effective. This was done by external experts and by the best teachers in the area. The main COST was providing cover for the teachers to have time off to be trained or to train. The training happened in Teaching Schools. The host school teachers gave training to 15 or so teachers from the schools being supported. A teacher in each supported school was appointed the in-house mentor to help the trainee develop back in their own school. Each school is different and had an adviser to offer bespoke solutions for that school. The advisers were often former HMIs, senior educational consultants, former heads or directors of children's services. They were experts who knew how to fix a problem.

In the late 1990s London schools were the worst in the country. Today they outperform schools in the rest of England, achieving the highest proportion of students obtaining good GCSEs, the highest percentage of schools rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted and the highest GCSE attainment for pupils from poorer backgrounds.

In 2008 the London Challenge initiative also expanded it to include two new geographical areas – Greater Manchester and the Black Country. The programme was renamed for those areas as the City Challenge.

In 2012 the Department for Education published a review of the City Challenge (Hutchings et al, 2012) which had been commissioned by the previous government. They concluded that the programme had achieved most of its objectives.

> *"Perhaps the most effective aspect of City Challenge was that it recognised that people, and schools, tend to thrive when they feel trusted, supported and encouraged. The ethos of the programme, in which successes were celebrated and it was recognised that if teachers are to inspire pupils they themselves need to be motivated and inspired, was a key factor in its success."* (Hutchings et al, 2012).

In 2010 Gove scrapped the London Challenge and the City Challenge. This was a mistake. The improvement in London schools had been dramatic and without great cost. It would surely have been right to see whether the methods used in the London Challenge could have been extended to other cities that badly needed to improve.

PISA results: a verdict on the Gove reforms?

PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) is funded by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). The programme,

which started in 2000, tests pupil performance across OECD countries every three years. PISA is the most rigorous project ever undertaken to assess what makes schooling effective.

PISA tests are computer-based, administered to a sample of 15-year-olds in each country and cover reading, science and mathematics; 15-year-olds are chosen because at this age most children in most OECD countries are reaching the end of compulsory education. The tests are not directly linked to the school curriculum; additional questions are asked to discover more about the schools the pupils go to, their socio-economic background and their attitude to school.

In October 2010 Gove made a speech referencing the 2009 PISA results:

"One of the tragedies of the last ten years has been our failure to keep pace with the world's best education systems.
We've fallen behind;
From 4th to 14th for science
From 7th to 17th for literacy
From 8th to 24th for mathematics."

The Gove reforms should be judged to some degree by the PISA results, although it is too early to do this with complete confidence. The PISA ranks for the UK in 2018 show an improvement:

	UK RANK	
	2015	**2018**
Maths	27th	18th
Science	15	14
Reading	22	14

But of course, Gove's policies were only applied in England and England has shot ahead of other parts of the UK in maths; here are the actual maths scores:

	Maths	
	2015	**2018**
England	493	504
Wales	480	487
Scotland	490	489
N Ireland	493	492

Science was less impressive, although still stronger in England than other parts of the UK:

	Science	
	2015	**2018**
England	512	507
Wales	485	488
Scotland	497	490
N Ireland	500	491

Reading has also improved in England:

	Reading	
	2015	**2018**
England	500	505
Wales	471	483
Scotland	493	504
N Ireland	497	501

So – a bit early to judge, but as far as we can tell this looks like a very successful push up the rankings. England, following the Gove reforms, was doing well.

Michael Gove was moved from education in 2014 because it was felt that he had upset teachers to an unsustainable degree. He was replaced by Nicky Morgan who, as far as we can tell, was encouraged to avoid all further innovation.

But in four years Gove had reformed every aspect of the state school system in England. Although many serving teachers criticise the Gove reforms there are thousands of others who think he was the best Secretary of State since Ken Baker and that many millions of pupils have benefited, already, from his good work.

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