

2014/7

7 Feb 2014

Pocket Watch – Reflections on Michael Gove's latest speech

Introduction

Michael Gove's recent speech at the London Academy may have been short on specific announcements but it was long on policy implication. It has attracted considerable attention, some of it for obvious reasons, so what did he say and why has it attracted such attention?

What did he say?

There was one overall message and four, if not announcements, certainly recommendations. The overall message was that *"English state education is no longer bog standard but getting better and better."* The evidence for this was the recently reported drop in the number of schools below the floor standard, *"the best generation of teachers ever"* and a transformed school system. Whether this constituted *"the renaissance of state education"* as claimed is perhaps open to question but it was of course an opportunity to claim vindication of the current reforms. As for the announcements, they included the following:

- A new push on classroom discipline with clear guidance for teachers enshrined in an updated **booklet** of advice from the Dept spelling out what sanctions schools and teachers could reasonably take if required, anything from a verbal reprimand to running around a playing field and ultimately exclusion. Ofsted continue to point to discipline being an issue in a number of schools and is launching no-notice inspections accordingly
- State schools to adopt some of the best practices of independent schools: anything from a longer school day to after school activities to character-building exercises, what Dr Seldon often describes as 'character grit.' In essence, Michael Gove suggested the best schools have two distinctive features which he's keen for all schools to emulate: *"excellence and rigour in the classroom...a rich and rounded education beyond it"*
- The re-introduction of formal testing at KS3, something that was raised by Sir Michael Wilshaw and others following the recent PISA tests results and which Michael Gove said he was *"open to arguments about."* The OECD has already proposed making sample PISA tests available to English schools from this year at a cost and another alternative as Michael Gove pointed out is the Common Entrance Exam taken currently by 11+ and 13+ year olds as an exam for entry to senior school in the independent sector
- Using renowned experts to help develop parts of the curriculum. This has become a growing feature of qualification design recently where Sir Tim Gowers and Professor Martin Hyland respectively have been leading on the development of more challenging maths requirements and where Michael Gove added two more eminent names to the roll call: Professor Mark Warner on A level Physics and Professor Christopher Pelling on classics

Why the strong interest in the speech?

Clearly it's come at a time when there's a lot going on around the Dept at the moment but there are three other reasons why it's garnered so much attention. First because it highlights that election manoeuvres are well and truly under way; second because it demonstrates what the next stage of reform of the school system might look like, the dismantling of the Berlin Wall between the state and the independent sector and all that, and third because it indicates an important political message the Government is trying to get across, namely about who is best to manage transformational change whether of the economy or public services.



Steve Besley

Head of Policy (UK and International)
Pearson Think Tank

Pocket Watches are intended to provide quick, informal updates on national developments. Information is correct at the time of writing and is offered in good faith. No liability is accepted for decisions made on the basis of information given.
Michael Gove's London Academy speech Feb 2014