

## Govian Social Fracking

### A short polemic

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Tony Blair's priority of *education, education, education* gave us more Green and White Papers, more Bills and Acts of Parliament and more restructuring and initiatives than you could shake a stick at. What possibly prevented it all descending into chaos was the New Labour approach to government, which was to performance manage an entire nation. Essentially, educators and others were all part of a series of ever changing business plans, each with its own jargon that had to be learned quickly in time for the next performance management conversation or the next inspection. At General Election time it seemed as though the electors, not the politicians, were being appraised and held to account. Government set the targets: we had to hit them.

At first I thought because Michael Gove had let the World know what an admirer he is of Tony Blair and how much he learned from his apologia, *Tony Blair, A Journey*, that to make sense of his approach to educational policy-making it helped to see it as a continuum giving us yet more Adonis inspired thoughts and dreams. An early clue to why it is not came from a former flatmate of Gove. Nick Boles, who became the minister for planning, explained that *chaos*, not *planning*, is the key to Big Society. This was one reason why, last year, I began to draft a rather long essay for my website on what I think is going on, using the term *social fracking* as both a working title and a theme (some of what follows has been extracted and adapted from that). Apart from the satisfaction provided by the sound of the words *frack* and *fracking* they seem to me to be a helpful illustration of what Gove and co. intend for us.

Instability, uncertainty, chaos and confusion even de-civilisation will ensue as educational and social stabilisers, let alone equalisers, are dismantled. As our Earth is fracked so shall be our society and although favour shall continue to be given to the already favoured the damage will not be confined to the already disadvantaged.

Before, however, I set out the charge sheet to be levelled at Michael Gove I want to provide a bit of perspective by asking a couple of questions.

1. Which Secretary of State for Education created more comprehensive schools than all others combined, irrespective of party?
2. Which Secretary of State for Education planned the abolition of the one-dimensional and eugenically based O-Level and, learning from the multi-dimensional and far more educationally advanced CSE, gave us GCSE with differentiation by outcome, teaching and examining that was more accessible and lots of coursework encouraging sustained independent learning and

research skills? It was even possible, for a while, to design your own GCSE under Mode-3 rules.

The answer to the first question is Margaret Thatcher and the answer to the second is Sir Keith Joseph. Now, perhaps, we can better locate Michael Gove on the Left-Right Educational Spectrum. What an achievement, to have placed hard right demons in an educational pantheon of soft liberal progressives. Reflecting upon Gove it almost becomes possible to see Thatcher and Joseph as part of the narrative of Whig History: a history that includes Gladstone's 1870 Education Act making schooling compulsory, the 1911 Parliament Act which curtailed the power of the unelected Tory dominated House of Lords and Harold Wilson's Open University. Wilson (a former member of the Liberal Party) used to say how proud he was to have completed what Gladstone started.

One lesson that Michael Gove learned from Tony Blair (and from Kenneth Baker, if you remember his Gerbil) is that if you intend to *deform* something it will be clever to steal the language of Whig historians and call it instead *reform*. Not a single BBC eyebrow is raised while reading out yet more news of Gove's 'reforms'. He has won the war to control the language aided, it has to be said, by Stephen Twigg who shows no signs of socialism or even of fight.

I believe that there are six components in a social fracking kit. They are numbered below. The Coalition has them all but, because of the speed at which he bypasses evidence and the views of others, Michael Gove leads the way in using it. I am reminded of Toad of Toad Hall when, for the first time, he acquired the keys to a motorcar.

And by the way, just because Michael Gove concentrates upon schools it will be unwise to assume that the effects of his fracking will not spread beyond them.

## **The charge sheet against Michael Gove (so far)**

### **1. Anti political behaviour**

Politics should be an inclusive and consensual process of arriving at values prior to policy-making. You and your colleagues do not work like this. Your party was given no electoral endorsement and since then you have taken no steps to include professionals, parents and pupils in discourse that could establish educational values leading to policy changes. Inclusion, gaining consent and even pausing to reflect do not feature in your way of working.

You are, therefore, charged with being anti-political.

### **2. Anti democratic behaviour**

You are removing schools from democratically accountable local government and handing them over to private and profit making companies, disregarding the unwillingness of the electorate and the profession to endorse your policies. Democracy has many forms but it

always allows for disagreement and dissent. You suppress, insult or ignore any expression of other points of view.

You are, therefore, charged with being anti-democratic.

### **3. Anti intellectual behaviour**

You are unwilling to engage with evidence that might bring into question the narrow prejudices with which you began the job of Secretary of State. For example, Ofsted reported that the best way to learn to be a teacher was with a university. You ignored that evidence because it did not fit with your views. You are also de-intellectualising the profession by dismissing the importance of qualifications and by stifling its ability to undertake masters and doctoral level work. You see teachers as instructors working in narrow subject silos defined by you.

You are, therefore, charged with being anti-intellectual.

### **4. Anti educational behaviour**

An education system should be fair and fulfil all. Its purpose is perverted when schools are differentiated by resource, religious beliefs, privilege and advantage. And yet you are creating a rigged free-for-all in which the favours will go to the already favoured while the rest shall be negatively labelled for life. Furthermore, your approach to public examinations will impoverish the learning experience by returning to simplistic and divisive modes and excluding opportunity for sustained learning and the acquisition and practice of research skills and questioning. You call for rigour but you give us rigor, as in mortis.

You are, therefore, charged with being anti-educational.

### **5. Anti social behaviour**

You are part of a government that seeks to dissolve and distort institutions, policies and conventions that, under the banner of the Welfare State, have worked to minimise the damaging effects of privilege and inequality. Your education policies fit into a strategy that unfairly encourages the fulfilment of a few at the expense of the many.

You are, therefore, charged with being anti-social.

### **6. Exploiting the ignorance of your boss**

You have a boss whose educational, social and professional lives have all taken place in a series of small bubbles in which he mixed and mixes with people from the same bubbles. Like you he went to an exclusive university that has, by being given extra public funding, worked hard over the years to construct exaggerated perceptions of its elitist brand value.

He also studied for a degree famously designed for specialists in superficiality.

You are, therefore, charged with exploiting the ignorance of your boss in order to get away with it.

The fracking efforts of Gove and Co. are all part of Nick Boles' political chaos theory. Getting the occasional policy-making speeding ticket will not stop him from reducing the curriculum to an approved set of 'facts' to be learned by rote and regurgitated in tests of memory that he proposes to call World-class exams. I doubt if he remembers the fiasco of World-class Tests back in 2001. He and his colleagues will be happy if only a small percentage of school leavers go through to a shrunken number of 'elitist' universities while the rest go to universities clearly labelled as inferior or, an even worse label in their minds, colleges of further education.

To be a member of a profession means that you must 'profess' something and for educators that something must include fulfilment which is dependent upon fairness. A fracked society will increase unfairness and limit fulfilment. For me Michael Gove is a greater danger to society than any of his colleagues.

**Cliff Jones**