

CONSERVATIVES TRUST SCHOOLS

Steve Mastin, Head of History at an academy school in Cambridgeshire, former Conservative PPC in 2010 and Chairman of the Conservative Education Society, outlines how we can re-energise our state education system.

Let me take you back to 1999 when I began my teaching career under a Labour Government. The comedian Les Dawson summed it up well when he said, “I went to the doctor and asked for something for persistent wind. He gave me a kite.” Labour gave me dozens of educational kites, having wrongly diagnosed what the problems were in our schools. Underachievement was wilfully covered up by Labour as grade inflation ‘proved’ that pupils were getting smarter; a broken exams system involved re-sit after re-sit where only the best grade counted; and vituperative denunciations by the unions of any suggestion that not all teachers should be paid the same amount of money with annual pay rises.

The Department of Children, Schools and Families as it was then known, (or Curtains and Soft Furnishings as teachers knew it so we got the letters the right way round), was a hive of activity until the 2010 general election. I lived through initiative after initiative, strategy after strategy, directive after directive emanating from the top floor of the Ministry and the profession suffered from a teachers’ version of chronic fatigue syndrome. We just got used to one Stalinist edict after another, honoured more in the breach than in the observance, as teachers like me awaited the next one, another well-meaning kite from people who had no idea how to fix the problems in education. Change is something teachers cope with as it is part of everyday school life, but the changes

CONSERVATIVES TRUST SCHOOLS

from a succession of Labour Education Secretaries were so frequent that nothing was left to settle in. The Department always had to be doing something, appear busy, bring forth grand plans and recommend fresh innovations. All that changed in May 2010.

Michael Gove, when we were in opposition, had worked hard, consulted widely, and listened to the views of a variety of vested interests in the educational world. His solution could be summed up in two verbs: *trust* and *simplify*. Three examples stand out: trust headteachers to run their schools, simplify the exams system to restore trust, and trust headteachers when it comes to performance related pay.

TRUST SCHOOLS

Trust headteachers to make decisions for the good of their school, answerable to the governing body which represents parents. No longer would a well-meaning local authority adviser, 30 miles away in Shire Hall tell schools how they could spend their money for the good of their pupils and, in the process, shave off 20% for the coffers of the Local Education Authority (LEA). Tony Blair's academies programme would be rolled out with any school that wanted to breaking free of LEA control taking the reins of school leadership and finance. Decisions that headmasters of independent schools made every day of the week would now be available to headteachers and principals in the state sector.

I worked for ten years under an inspirational headteacher whose passion for educational standards and high behavioural expectations of every single pupil, regardless of background or ability, turned my school around. I watched her walk around the college, popping into lessons to encourage staff, proudly giving prospective parents a tour of her school, and walk into an assembly hall full of pupils where they

SMART GOVERNMENT: A PARLIAMENT STREET GUIDE

would fall silent. She would have given any top notch public school headmaster a run for his money. In 2010, the Conservatives gave her the freedom to run the school in any way she wanted without having to check with the chap in Shire Hall. Why should only a handful of failing schools be permitted to be free? Now all schools, if the parents and governors were on board, could be free and, unsurprisingly, three quarters of secondary schools are now academies with no sign of turning back. I once asked Gove what would happen if a school made bad decisions and overspent, or standards began to slip; in other words, the school failed and there was no LEA support. He replied, with his usual forthright confidence, that he would let them fail. Schools would learn how to succeed; after all, that's what independent schools do. He was right. What a contrast to Labour who don't trust schools to run their affairs efficiently, don't trust teachers to teach without dozens of government strategies, and ultimately, don't trust parents to do what is best for their children. A civil servant from the Labour years recently remarked to me that many of them were often looking for work to do in the Department, such was the shortage of initiatives that used to be drawn up, discussed, implemented, reviewed, adapted. I like that.

SIMPLIFY THE EXAMS SYSTEM

In Government, we can be proud that we have simplified an overly complicated exams system by making it more rigorous. While Labour kept tinkering with the exams system in their well-meaning but misguided way (dishing out yet another kite), Gove went straight for the root cause of the problem. The exams needed to be rigorous which meant they should come at the end of the course pupils had studied. No longer would pupils be examined in modules after just a term's work, or at the end of Year 10 rather than at the end of their whole GCSE programme of study. Teachers up and down the land could tell

CONSERVATIVES TRUST SCHOOLS

stories of pupils who bombed on an exam because they did not revise and their justification for it was that they would re-sit it. I had a very bright girl once tell me she had to re-sit her Maths exam. Surprised by this comment, I asked her why, only to be told her Maths teacher had recommended it since she was one mark from an A*. One mark? Where was the incentive to work hard the first time around, revise and then sit the exam? The exam wasn't a serious one after all and could be done again and again until the pupil got that one extra mark, and the grade she wanted.

Schools could enter pupils as many times as they wanted with the exam boards laughing all the way to the bank. And the biggest losers were our pupils who had to endure this treadmill of modular exams with no end in sight. All this has gone thanks to the Conservatives. Exams are now terminal which means pupils will no longer suffer the drudgery of endless re-sits, schools save money and the public can have faith in the grades awarded. Has Labour agreed with this policy? Of course not. Labour is silent on the subject.

TRUST HEADTEACHERS TO REWARD GOOD TEACHERS

When I began teaching, there was an unwritten, unspoken acknowledgment that some teachers were better than others. Parents knew it, pupils certainly knew it, and teachers in the school knew it. Some teachers clocked in before registration and clocked off when the school bell went at the end of the day. They never ran a club, never worked at lunchtime, marking was infrequent, and they enjoyed weeks of paid holidays. Parents dreaded their children getting 'that teacher'. Interestingly, the unions would always protect the pay and job of 'that teacher'. Unions did not care about whether the teacher was any good.

SMART GOVERNMENT: A PARLIAMENT STREET GUIDE

In fact, when I heard that one of my teachers in her first year of teaching was bullied by a fellow teacher, I reported it to the headteacher. The unions got involved and, at the time, I was a member of the same union as the bully. The union representative told me I should have dealt with it 'in house' since we were both comrades. The NUT was more concerned with the bully's job than the fact that he had bullied an inspiring young professional.

Performance related pay is something most companies in the private sector are used to. It stands to reason that one colleague who does 'his job' should not be paid as much as the colleague who goes above and beyond. Why should that not apply to teaching? The unions fought tooth and nail to prevent bad teachers being paid less because they knew they would lose control over yet another centralised plank in the statist attitude towards education. LEA control: gone. All teachers paid the same: gone. Every parent and pupil knows which teachers go above and beyond. I know music teachers who run a music club every lunchtime and then every day after school. P.E. teachers who take pupils to matches at other schools and run trips to outdoor adventure camps in France. Science teachers who run after school revision sessions for those pupils who need additional support in the run up to exams. Drama teachers who run trips to the theatre in London on a school night and get home at midnight ready to teach again the next day. English teachers who sit in their classrooms marking essays until 7 o'clock and then go home to plan lessons for the next day. History teachers who run trips for countless pupils to the First World War Battlefields, or Berlin or Rome to enrich their love of the subject. And all of these things are not part of their job description. It's no wonder some teachers clock off when the bell goes.

I trust my headteacher to pay teachers according to what contribution they make to the school community. To attach a teacher's pay simply

CONSERVATIVES TRUST SCHOOLS

to a class' GCSE or A level results would be unfair. After all, a teacher who teaches a bottom set English class is not going to get A grades from the pupils with weak literacy or those for whom English is a second language. Other factors must be taken into account like how much progress a pupil has made. A pupil predicted a G grade who, with an inspirational and dedicated teacher, achieves a D, is impressive. It's not just about the A grades. But the corollary is also true; that a teacher who doesn't mark much, whose lessons are dull and sedentary, who lacks passion, but whose motivated pupils in the top set achieve A* grades is unsurprising. Headteachers know the difference and should be trusted to pay teachers according to the work they do. If that means that bad teachers leave the profession because of lack of pay progression then the only voices raised in horror will be those of the overpaid union bosses. Not a parent in the land will complain and the pupils will rejoice.

How then can we build on our achievements in Government as we approach the general election? We should trumpet what we have done since Labour cannot refute any of it. But the momentum is with us and I would like to offer three policy suggestions for a Conservative education manifesto that would leave poor Tristram Hunt with little to offer except his manifestly ludicrous Hippocratic Oath for teachers.

REFORM OF OFSTED

Let's roll out the trust of headteachers even further. Schools need to be inspected but teachers do not. If a school's results are very good and parents are satisfied with their child's education then 25 lessons do not

SMART GOVERNMENT: A PARLIAMENT STREET GUIDE

need to be observed by Ofsted in their two day inspection. What normally happens when a school receives 'The Phone Call' the day prior to 'The Visitation', is that all the teachers are sent a frightening email calling them to a meeting in the staffroom. No matter how reassuring the headteacher's words are, teachers know that for the next two days their life is on hold. The night before the intense experience of The Visitation, teachers frantically work until two in the morning preparing lessons on the off chance that an inspector might pop into the classroom for 20 minutes and then deliver his verdict that, for many teachers, no matter how outstanding, feels like a justification for their entire existence. I know of many superb teachers who had a bad morning and so they were judged as 'requiring improvement' – which to teachers means they are crap.

What is even worse, the inspector is often not a subject specialist so an English teacher could find the 20 minutes of her lesson graded by a former maths teacher. What does a maths teacher know about how to teach Dickens or Shakespeare to a class of boys with weak literacy? So what ends up happening is the inspector will look for generic skills that he can comment on. Did the teacher tell the pupils the objectives of the lesson? Did she talk for longer than three minutes? Did she differentiate the work for different abilities within the class? Do pupils know what level they are working at? Did the teacher have a plenary at the end of the lesson to review progress? Not an ounce of subject specificity. What in fact has occurred is that Ofsted begins to look at pedagogy without an object. Perversely, Ofsted has achieved what Sir Michael Wilshaw is, in fact, opposed to. Ofsted has implicitly fostered progressivism in the classroom rather than rich subject knowledge in the traditional sense. A history classroom should be alive with narrative, those captivating moments in the story, the tension of the twists and turns in historical events of which pupils possess a deep knowledge. Only then will they be able to analyse, in any sophisticated

CONSERVATIVES TRUST SCHOOLS

way, the causes of the Battle of Hastings or the First World War. Being a good story teller is a must for a good history teacher; they go hand in glove. Yet if my lesson is to be observed by a former Science teacher I would probably be marked down for talking too much if I spent time on the narrative and chronological sequence of events. So I learn to play the game for those 20 minutes and include lots of generic progressive skills so I don't let down the school. What a perverse way of teaching.

However, when performance management time comes around in a normal school year, as head of history with 15 years' experience, I observe each member of my department teach *history*, not teach skills. I have built up over my career an in-depth knowledge of *history*, the ways in which *history* can and cannot be assessed and what the history teaching community knows about what 'getting better' at *history* looks like. No science teacher-turned-inspector could ever do that. The world would not fall apart if Ofsted stopped inspecting lessons. Instead, they should trust the judgment of the school's performance management system unless given reason to doubt it. Inspectors should consider parental surveys to see how satisfied the community is with the governance of the school, the behaviour around the school site to determine how safe children are and observe how pupils interact with each other and with teachers. In addition, they should look very closely at the school's curriculum provision, something that rarely happens at the moment, which leads to my third recommendation.

CURRICULUM ENTITLEMENT

The Historical Association has surveyed history teachers for the past six years. It has built up a detailed picture of provision of history teaching in our schools which is very revealing, and if we take history as one example, is likely to be replicated in other subject areas outside

SMART GOVERNMENT: A PARLIAMENT STREET GUIDE

the core subjects of English, maths and science. The survey revealed that the time for history in schools has been cut year on year. In 2011, the Daily Telegraph reported that in many secondary schools, pupils received only two years of history education. This same story could be written just before the general election as the excellent three year Gove curriculum is still not being taught in schools. Some headteachers were scrapping compulsory history in Year 9 to begin the GCSE courses early which meant that if two thirds of pupils (another finding of the HA survey) did not continue the study of history to age 16, then it was not possible for them to study the National Curriculum in the time allotted. Worse news; some schools did not employ history graduates to teach the subject, so your son or daughter would be taught history in Year 7 by a highly competent geography teacher. Or worse still, I know of some schools that have identified pupils at the start of Year 7 who are unlikely to achieve a C grade in their GCSEs so will be removed, yes removed, from studying history *at all* in order to work on their literacy. Ofsted, by the way, does not comment on this and certainly does not condemn it. It is plainly wrong that some pupils are permitted to be withdrawn from lessons studying their nation's past.

My recommendation is that the Government should mandate that *every* pupil of whatever background, ethnicity or ability should study our nation's history. This is not only to ensure that all pupils – Christians, Jews, Muslims, boy and girls, rich and poor, whether in Tower Hamlets or Tewksbury – are given the same entitlement, but also to ensure that history's place in the curriculum is secured. I would go further and recommend that history should be compulsory to 16 as it is in every other European country with the exception of Albania. Kenneth Baker's original National Curriculum of 1990 was designed to be taught to 16 but Ken Clarke subsequently bottled the decision and we have lived with the consequences ever since – a five year curriculum squeezed into an impossible one, two or three years. A future

CONSERVATIVES TRUST SCHOOLS

Conservative Education Secretary should insist that history, like science (for some bizarre reason), is compulsory for five years. This is the only way we will cover the curriculum to the extent it deserves if you want us to teach everything from Caesar to the Cold War. The alternative is a hotchpotch of practice where some pupils have one hour a week for one year while my pupils enjoy two hours a week over three years. If we can't (or won't) make it compulsory to 16 then Ofsted should rate a school's curriculum as requiring improvement if pupils are not given the minimum entitlement of three years to cover the National Curriculum. This is every child's birth-right and Conservatives should guard it and enforce it.

TEACHER TRAINING

Labour has on its website an anodyne statement about top quality professional development but, as usual, nothing to explain what this means or how to implement it. It also opines that Labour will "ensure all teachers in state schools become qualified." *Become* qualified? That means work towards it, doesn't it? So how long will this take? And if an excellent Physics teacher with fantastic results but without a PGCE refuses to be 'trained', will Tristram Hunt sack her? I don't think so; Physics teachers are like hen's teeth. Considering most (possibly all?) of his teachers in the independent sector did not go through teacher training, does that mean that their first-class degree from Cambridge is worthless? Or the Music teacher who inspires on a daily basis and gives up his time after school to organise concerts will be removed from post because he does not have the right letters after his name? Don't get me wrong, I still believe the best way into the profession involves a strong partnership between university and school like my year-long history PGCE, but it is not the *only* route into teaching, particularly when we need to recruit and retain the *best* teachers to teach our

SMART GOVERNMENT: A PARLIAMENT STREET GUIDE

children. Another route, Teach First, involves only six weeks training in August before you are dropped into a tough inner-city school in September – is that a qualification, Tristram?

Training teachers is one of the most important ways to ensure children receive the best education they can. A Conservative Government should ensure that those training the finest teachers in the country are identified and helped to expand their approach so it becomes universal. Yet, for example, the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) cut the numbers of the Cambridge history PGCE when it is known to be pro-knowledge and anti-generic skills. This history teacher training partnership is remarkable in the extent to which it has trained history teachers who, as Michael Gove observed, are among the finest in the state sector, some of whom are now headteachers of well-known free schools. So why did the NCTL slash the number of history teachers it is allowed to train? Some PGCE courses are dreadful and should close. Others should be replicated so we continue to send into our schools inspirational and dedicated professionals who are passionate about their subject discipline, rather than woolly-minded practitioners of generic skills and outdated child-centred learning.

Another thing, (which even the teaching unions would support), if a teacher is trained by the state then that teacher should work in a state school. If the taxpayer spends £9,000 for a graduate to go through an excellent PGCE course then that money needs to be recouped through, let's say, a minimum of service of five years in the state sector. If the teacher chooses to work in the independent sector instead of giving those five years, which is his prerogative, then he or his new school should repay the money.

Labour's Tristram Hunt has no such policies, but rather has floated a few ideas to see if they would gain traction. A Hippocratic Oath for

CONSERVATIVES TRUST SCHOOLS

teachers was pilloried with mock oaths appearing all over social media about promising to do what the Ministry said, or marking until midnight. And then there was his other gem of licensing teachers every five years, which has been quietly dropped. Tony Blair famously said his three priorities were 'education, education, education' but then his only policy of note was allowing a few failing schools to convert into academies. Poor Tristram Hunt has not a single policy of note, so it is no wonder that the former NUT general secretary said Labour has no vision for education. The Greens have a clear education policy and it's bonkers, with separate paragraphs about cookery skills and sexual relationships but not one for history. Ukip wants to bring back grammar schools; a clear policy, but fundamentally flawed if you are one of the 80 per cent of pupils who wouldn't get into one. We must trumpet loudly our monumental achievements of which we can be proud and ensure we continue to be bold in our education reforms and aim for the best teachers and best schools in the world.