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The Gove Legacy and the Politics of Education after 2015 (3): Can the Legacy Endure?

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Abstract: Coiffait, who founded NAHT Edge during the coalition years, assesses the likely longevity of any Gove legacy. Writing from a trade union perspective, he draws attention to the Gove years as ones of ‘force-fed medicine’ imposed on schools, noting the drive and ambition of Gove and his policies, but noting also the divisive nature of Gove’s approach and, in particular, Gove’s relationship with the teaching profession and academic educationalists. Coiffait addresses the Gove legacy ‘in the round’, examining the reforms from a variety of perspectives including that of – in his view – confused parents struggling to make sense of the volume of changes.

Keywords: education policy; Michael Gove; school reform

Is force-fed medicine a legacy that will last in schools?

Time is always the best judge of a ‘legacy’, and it will be no different when we look back at Michael Gove’s four years as Secretary of State for Education. However even at the time of writing, just a few months after he was effectively sacked from his post, there are three things that can already be said with certainty about his impact on schools:

- Although ambitious his reform programme was dominated by an obsession with structures, over anything else, including people.
- The manner in which he conducted his reforms meant that he failed to persuasively articulate the rationale for change.
- As a result he lost the confidence of his most important stakeholder group, leaving a more fragmented, demoralised and politicised system behind him.

Each will have a bearing on how his longer-term influence is assessed, and, ultimately, how he will be remembered in future. Some have likened him to a doctor that gives a lengthy diagnosis of the problem, many parts accurate and some perhaps spurious, but then goes on to provide a flawed prescription and with such a poor bedside manner that the patient rejects the entire course of treatment. I would agree that force-fed medicine rarely achieves the desired result in the long term.

Rushing to change structures

Michael Gove is a classic example of a free-market libertarian conservative, one who firmly believes that it is only by freeing people from interference by the state and the left-wing establishment can we unleash their natural tendencies to want to get ahead by pursuing a traditional, rigorous and academic education – akin to his own. At its heart, his programme of reform was intended to create excess school places, as in his view this would then harness parental ambition, foster competition between schools – and that this is the best way to drive up standards. This is the reason for his focus on creating as many independent new schools as quickly and cheaply as possible, such as through the Free School and Academies programmes. This also helps explain why local authorities, who have a role in planning local school places, have been decimated. He attempted so much change that rather than structural