

## HIGHER STANDARDS, FREER MINDS

Speech by Michael Gove MP, Shadow Secretary of State for DCSF  
Haberdashers' Aske's Education lecture  
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Can I first of all thank you for the kind invitation to give this lecture tonight?

I am a huge admirer of what the Haberdashers' Company has done for education in this country. Over centuries the Haberdashers have displayed a commitment to learning, to philanthropy and to support for the poor, materially and in spirit, which has been exemplary.

Today the Haberdashers fulfil their noble charitable functions more successfully than ever. I had the great pleasure of visiting Haberdashers' Aske's Hatcham a few months ago.

I was quite simply amazed by the quality of education this inner city comprehensive offers its pupils. Under Elizabeth Sidwell's inspirational leadership a generation of young men and women from every background are acquiring a superbly rounded education which is taking them onto university and success in the wider world.

From the sublime quality of the music the pupils played for me on my visit to the obvious politeness, ambition and optimism of every pupil I met, everything about Haberdashers' Aske's spoke of excellence.

I know that the virtues which mark out Haberdashers' Aske's are qualities you are helping to disseminate more widely within the state system. I am delighted that Haberdashers' Aske's Hatcham has formed a partnership with a local primary school to help raise standards and I am hugely impressed that partnership extends to providing free school meals for every child.

Your sponsorship of Knights' Academy shows your continuing ambition to spread excellence throughout state education. And the success of all your schools shows what can be achieved when strong leadership is married with a commitment to excellence and what can be done when schools are set free to innovate.

## INNOVATION IN EDUCATION

The spirit of innovation – the restless desire to improve - the urgent sense that what we've inherited is never good enough – and we must always strive to do better – should be at the heart of education.

There are always voices ready to say that there is a natural limit to what we can do in extending education. There are those who argue that we should not expect too many children from a particular background to achieve academic success. There are those who argue that a school with a specific type of intake cannot be expected to enjoy good results. There are those who say that university education, by definition, can only ever be enjoyed or appreciated by a minority.

Well I reject that view. I believe that as our society advances, as the science of how the brain operates breaks new boundaries, as our teaching continues to improve, as we learn from other nations, as our children benefit from growing material prosperity, then we can be confident that educational opportunity will be extended more and more widely.

The view advanced in the seventies - and still held by some on the Right - that when it comes to education more means worse is quite wrong. More should be our aim. More young people who have acquired more knowledge which gives them more ability to understand, and find fulfilment in, this world.

Our aim should be the democratisation of knowledge - and the defeat of ignorance. More children knowing how to use numbers with speed, sophistication and pleasure, more children confident in their command of language, who can use words with grace, nuance and precision. More children who know their nation's history and take pride in our achievements. More children who can hold a violin bow or a paintbrush with confidence and know how to make something beautiful because their knowledge of beauty is rooted in an understanding of past genius. More is better.

Much, much better.

And this stress of mine on more learning is driven by my belief in the ennobling, emancipatory power, of a good school. I believe education

should aim to make children the authors of their own life story - it should enable them to take control of their lives and make the choices - economic, social and cultural - which bring fulfilment.

Schools should be places where children acquire the stock of intellectual capital to meet and master the world's challenges, rather than leaving, as all too many do at the moment, knowledge poor and thus helpless in the face of economic turbulence and social change.

The world in which my children are growing up is a place of dizzying change – where the quality of education will be decisive.

We are living through an exhilarating age of discovery and exploration - even more exciting than the age of Drake and Raleigh or the time of Scott and Shackleton. They ventured to the hidden corners of the globe, but now we are travelling further - penetrating the mysteries of creation itself.

The mapping of the human genome creates the potential for advances which could eliminate suffering and misery for millions. We are on the brink of breakthroughs in particle physics which could lay bare the secrets of the universe. Scientific innovation is driving improvements in every sphere of our existence.

The human brain is accomplishing amazing things - and the new world being created is one in which brainpower dictates our destiny - which is why it is our responsibility to give young minds the best possible training.

And in the ever more competitive world which globalisation has created we dare not waste talent. If our society is to prosper, be secure and continue to offer opportunity we have to stay ahead of the competition.

I am, therefore, encouraged by so much of what I see in the schools I'm lucky enough to be able to visit.

I am confident that the quality of teaching now is higher than ever – and initiatives such as Teach First have helped ensure that some of the very

best graduates now aspire to teach and see the profession as a fitting way to give expression to their idealism and talents.

I am certain that our children are working as hard as ever – and the effort, ambition and enjoyment I see in so many classrooms is vivid evidence of student commitment.

I am also convinced that parents – of every class and background - are more passionate than ever about securing a great education for their children – and the pressure on numbers at the very best schools underlines that.

And I am excited that reforms introduced by Ken Baker and followed up by Tony Blair have shown how much better schools can do when liberated to innovate and the case for greater diversity in school provision is winning new allies every day.

## MANAGING DECLINE - THE BRITISH DISEASE

But I also have profound concerns – and I want to address two of them tonight.

The first relates to the testing and exam system we put our children through.

The second relates to the ideology of those who have captured the commanding heights of our educational bureaucracy – and the way it works against the interests of the most disadvantaged.

Let me turn first of all to our testing, examination and qualification system.

If you listen to ministers speak you would think all was for the best in the best of all possible worlds. The story they tell is a narrative of ever-rising achievement. For which they, most of all, deserve credit.

They point to improving performance at every Key Stage, to ever higher pass rates at GCSE and A-level, and argue, well actually they assert, that is proof that our education system is dramatically improving under their stewardship.

But as any scientist will tell you - when you're attempting to draw conclusions from a single experiment you need to be wary - you need a control.

And the Government's hypothesis that ministerial interventions have driven up standards, made our children more knowledgeable, equipped them better for a more competitive future, needs to be tested against the evidence.

Firstly, and crucially, the international evidence suggests that the Government's account of what's been happening in our education system is deliberately misleading.

Over the last eight years this country has dropped behind our international competitors in every test of educational achievement.

In the PISA studies of advanced economies and their educational performance we have dropped from –

4th to 14th place for science

7th to 17th place for literacy

and

8th to 24th for mathematics

This drop isn't just a consequence of other countries improving at a faster rate - the absolute performance of our students dropped.

In literacy we scored an average of 529 points in 2000, 507 in 2003 and 495 in 2006.

In Science, the scores dropped from 532 to 515 over the same period.

In the latest PIRLS study on reading we again dropped down the rankings - from 3rd place in 2001 to 15<sup>th</sup>.

The raw scores again showed us dropping from 553 points to 539.

In the TIMSS study on mathematical performance we languish in twentieth place – below Malaysia and Slovakia

In the World Economic Forum study – which measures how globally competitive a country is – the UK was 28<sup>th</sup> in the quality of its education, 28<sup>th</sup> in the quality of its primary education and 47<sup>th</sup> in maths and science education.

Indeed there isn't a single, robust, international study I'm aware of which compares our test performance with our competitors and shows us outpacing the competition...

But how can this be?

How can we reconcile on the one hand the ever higher performance in various national tests about which ministers boast - and the ever poorer performance in international tests about which they're in denial?

## LABOUR - THE PARTY OF DEVALUATION

The only logical explanation is that our examinations, like the pounds in our pockets, are no longer worth what they were.

What looks like great performance in our state-run exams turns out to be below par when compared internationally, just as claims about the robust health of our economy are shown up for the empty boasts they are when we are measured against our competitors in the markets. Like our currency, our exams have been devalued - under Labour.

A clutch of great passes in our state-run exams would once have secured a student here a position near the top of international rankings - but now no more. The qualifications we offer are no longer so robust and so you need more of them, at an ever higher level, just to hold your own in these world rankings. And that means grade inflation.

Just as you need more and more currency to buy the same goods when you have monetary inflation so you need more and more As to aspire to top rankings internationally, or even university places here, when you have grade inflation.

The sad truth is that our examination system is no longer a reliable guide to achievement.

Our students work harder than ever - our teachers not only work harder - they are better at what they do than ever but they are increasingly failed by an examination system which no longer guarantees academic excellence...

As research by the best academics has now, amply, demonstrated.

## MATHS DEVALUED

Peter Tymms at the University of Durham has shown that a student achieving an E in A level maths in 1998 would have achieved a B in 2004.

And Duncan Lawson from the University of Coventry has shown that students entering university in 2001 with a B at Maths A level displayed the level of knowledge which 10 years before would have been shown by a student with a grade N - or fail.

Indeed students who failed the Maths A level in 1991 performed better overall in tests of mathematical competence than those who secured a B pass in 2001.

Dr Jonathan Ramsay and John Corner have analysed maths papers from the 1960s to the present day and found topics which once used to be set for 16 year olds at the old O-level and even the CSE, which was designed for less academic pupils, now crop up in A-levels.

Their report pointed out that -

"finding areas and volumes using calculus, which used to be examined at O level are now examined in A level pure mathematics, but it is the O level questions which are harder" and, perhaps even more shockingly, "some applied mathematics CSE papers from the 1970s are almost indistinguishable from the mechanics unit one A level paper, with some CSE topics even overlapping with unit two. One calculus topic from O level pure mathematics is now to be found at A level."

A team of mathematicians led by Professor John Marks has also studied GCSE and O-level maths papers over time, specifically from 1951, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2006.

They found that "it is now possible to achieve a Grade C in GCSE mathematics having almost no conceptual knowledge of mathematics. This is due in part to the simplicity of the questions and the decline of algebra, geometry and proof within the papers."

The report further pointed out that -

"It has become substantially easier to achieve a Grade C since the inception of GCSEs in 1987. In 1990 the percentage mark on the Higher Tier for a Grade C was just over 50 per cent. However in 2000 and 2006 the required percentage mark for a Grade C had fallen to about 20 per cent; this mark could be attained by answering correctly the first four questions on Paper 5 and Paper 6."

Indeed, we discovered in 2004 that GCSE students taking Edexcel's version of the exam could get an A with just 45 per cent of the marks. 22 per cent secured a C pass. And only 0.7 per cent of the pupils who sat the paper failed to get a C or better.

## SCIENCE DEVALUED

So what is being tested at GCSE? Is it possible that lower grade boundaries do actually, despite it all, reflect tough questions?

Well, let me share some GCSE questions with you, and see what you think.

Here are some from Science GCSE papers.

Students are asked,

"For hundreds of years, scientists have found information about the stars using microscopes, space probes, seismometers or telescopes..."

They are then shown a table with the names of planets in order of their distance from the Sun. The table tells them that Jupiter's orbit around the

sun is 11.9 earth years and then one of the questions asks is the time taken for Jupiter to complete one orbit 1.9 earth years, 29.5 earth years, 65.4 earth years or 11.9 earth years...

The information is there - in front of the student's eyes - he doesn't need to bother writing it on his hand or looking at his neighbour - the exam board have given him the answer - he doesn't need to know any science before taking the exam - the science he needs is there in the exam...

Mind you, at least that question has science in it.

Listen to this question.

Residents have a variety of thoughts concerning the siting of the new power station. Two views are -

1 The nuclear power station will provide employment in the area.

2 Any release of radioactive material would be very dangerous.

Which statements are arguments in favour of siting the nuclear power station here - 1 only, 2 only, both 1 and 2 or neither...

That is not a test of scientific knowledge, it's not even a test of economics, or current affairs, or general knowledge. It is, at best, a matter of straightforward English comprehension.

And yet this is in the public examination paper - for some the school leaving certificate - we give to some of our most gifted students after 11 years of being taught science.

If that level of scientific knowledge is the basis on which we're going to produce the people who're building the next generation of nuclear power stations then we'd better refine all our arguments in favour of nuclear power...

These questions are not isolated examples.

Another question begins with pupils being shown the periodic table in their exam paper – with the names of the elements – and their chemical symbols listed.

Then the candidate is asked – in the periodic table is the symbol for oxygen – N, C, P or O...

Another chemistry question asks which compound results when sodium reacts with fluorine -

Sodium chloride

Fluorine Oxide

Sodium Oxide

Or Sodium Fluoride

I could go on - but I don't want us to be here all evening - these questions are by no stretch of any imagination a rigorous test of scientific understanding and a searching examination of scientific knowledge...

There is, however, one thing to be said in these examinations' defence. Because they are multiple choice tests the right answer should be clear and the marking process therefore relatively robust.

The same, as we know, cannot, sadly be said for other examinations. And again, the closer one looks the more powerful the evidence for a progressive decline in standards.

## DEFINING SUCCESS DOWNWARDS

In English - a subject less amenable to science and maths to multiple choice testing - the evidence again points to a devaluation.

It is now permissible to make many more spelling errors than ever before and get away with it. According to Cambridge Assessment more than 12

spelling errors in one piece of prose in 1980 would have got you a D pass, now you can manage with 40 in the same number of words.

Again in English the questions, although not multiple choice, are becoming easier for students. As even the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority admit.

In a report they published this year they acknowledged that between 2002 and 2005 questions had become so formulaic that candidates "could foresee too many of the likely questions" and faced too few "unforeseeable challenges". In other words - they had been taught to the test.

And as we all, notoriously, know, even those who decline to be taught for any test are still indulged by an examination system which fails to defend proper knowledge and learning.

When a student is asked in an English exam to describe the room he is sitting in - not quite up there with asking someone to write an essay on whether Hamlet is truly mad, but still - and the student replies by writing 'F.. Off,' our current exam system still awards him points.

For spelling and expressiveness. Apparently if the candidate had included an exclamation mark after his two pithy Anglo Saxon words, his score would have been even higher.

Looking at the state of our current exam system is enough to drive anyone to expletives but it has surely come to something when we reward inarticulacy, ugliness and ignorance rather than simply walking away from such a paper in tears...

Now, of course, the Government argues that it is taking action to guarantee standards - and points to the creation of its new exams regulator Ofqual as evidence.

Ofqual's job is to uphold the integrity of our examination system and bolster confidence in the qualifications our children acquire. A worthy ambition to have been asked to fulfil just seven months ago. And one which Ofqual has already failed to achieve.

Ofqual's first significant intervention in the examination system has not been an injection of greater rigour, an upholding of standards or a defence of knowledge. But the precise opposite.

Ofqual's debut performance in the examination arena was a bullying of one exam board - AQA - which led to a deliberate lowering of standards.

AQA was forced to lower the pass mark for its GCSE science paper to 20 per cent this year, against its own better judgement. Other exam boards had set the grade boundaries low but AQA held out, and initially refused to lower its pass mark, because it wished to keep standards comparable over time. In other words it was resistant to devaluation.

But instead of defending AQA's position, and insisting on higher standards all round, Ofqual simply accepted the lowest common denominator and told AQA to accept the lower grade boundary. As a result standards slipped, more candidates would get a pass which was worth less.

In other words, Ofqual devalued the exam. It performed a function which was the precise opposite of its founding mission.

As Isabel Nisbet, Ofqual's acting chief executive has said, "it was not ideal".

I regard it as simply unacceptable that the exam standards watchdog should be acting in this way. And a future Conservative Government would legislate to ensure this simply couldn't happen.

Ofqual would be given the powers to uphold and defend robust grade boundaries and Conservative ministers would require Ofqual to use those powers to guarantee that our exams and our pass marks were comparable with the world's best.

We have asked Sir Richard Sykes, the former rector of Imperial College and one of our most successful scientists, to review our entire system of assessment and qualifications in this country and we have made it clear that his aim is to ensure once more that our exams are internationally competitive so our country, and our children, can flourish in a much more competitive world. That is why we would legislate to make the fixing of our exam standards to an international benchmark crucial to our programme of radical reform.

The International Baccalaureate has become a successful, and increasingly popular examination because, among its other virtues, it has held its value over time. The number of students, as a proportion of candidates, securing the best grades has remained very similar over the years.

That is because the IB is managed beyond the reach of politicians – it cannot be devalued by ministers anxious to manipulate the figures to flatter their record. Indeed the educationalists who have designed and who manage the IB know that it is only by resisting any pressure to devalue - by maintaining adherence to an international Gold Standard - that their exam will retain and increase its popularity with parents.

## A TARGET CULTURE THAT MISSES THE POINT

One of the other, fundamental, problems with our exam system at the moment is that the principal driver for improvement is not what parents, students or teachers consider important but what suits ministers' political agenda.

This Government is determined to assert that its policies have brought historically unprecedented success in almost every field of human endeavour - and education is one of the areas most affected by this ambition.

So the Government sets targets, metrics of achievement, by which it can be judged. There is, of course, an inherent weakness in any system of accountability in which an organisation or individual itself sets the test by which it will be judged, but the problems in the Government's approach go well beyond that.

Take, for instance, the Government's focus on schools securing five good passes at GCSE for more of their pupils, and in particular the National Challenge, which focuses special attention on those schools which fail to secure five good passes for 30% of their students.

I am a passionate supporter, as I mentioned earlier, of more students acquiring more stretching qualifications and, in particular, of challenging the assumption that because students come from a particular background we should lower our expectations for them.

But I very much fear the mechanisms the Government have chosen actually have the effect of driving students away from more robust qualifications which will extend their opportunities.

I am worried, in particular, that students from poorer backgrounds are suffering more as a result of the Government's approach.

The Government has focussed specific attention on heads clearing the five GCSE hurdle - get over it and you're safe, fail and you can expect not just naming and shaming but the potential termination of your career.

Unsurprisingly, the pressure is on heads to bend all their energies to getting over that bar. And that creates a very specific and dangerous temptation.

Instead of ensuring that each student pursues the most appropriate qualifications for him or her there is a clear incentive to ensure they follow the courses which are most likely to boost the schools' GCSE performance.

That means more soft subjects and a particular rush towards those courses which are deemed to be the equivalent of a whole swathe of GCSEs.

Just last Friday I was talking to a group of headteachers who explained to me the popularity of one particular course – called Performing Engineering Operations. This course - which requires just one day's study on day release to college - is worth six good GCSE passes. Get your students to take it, and get them to pass the GCSE maths exam with a pass mark of 20%, lets remember, and the GCSE English exam in which they aren't punished for poor spelling but can get marks for profanity, and they become statistical success stories.

Never mind that the reality may be an impoverished, or narrowed, sense of achievement, the all-important barrier will have been cleared and the school will be safe.

One American writer once said that all great causes begin as a crusade, become a business and end as a racket. He was talking about communism but I fear the same thing now applies to our assessment and examination system.

## THE FLIGHT FROM QUALITY

One of the problems inherent in shepherding students towards certain exams simply to hit targets is that we may not be providing the next generation with the most rigorous preparation for the future.

We know from the research undertaken by Robert Coe at Durham University that some subjects are objectively harder, and others are easier routes to a good pass. There is, according to his research, more than a grade's difference between subjects such as Spanish and German on the one hand and on the other drama, or textiles, or media studies.

Sadly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the last few years have seen a precipitate drop in the numbers pursuing modern languages at GCSE and A level and a complementary increase in the number taking soft subjects.

Media Studies GCSE entries have increased by 43% in just two years - from 41,027 candidates in 2004/5 to 59,071 in 2006/7.

At A-level the rise over time has also been significant. In 1997 just 8,954 students took media studies A-level. By 2006 the number had risen by 157%.

This flight from quality is a concern for all of us - the scientific breakthroughs which will combat global warming, the mathematical models which will reduce financial risk and the medical innovations which will lengthen and enrich our lives are unlikely to be generated by close application to the GCSE media studies syllabus - but the cost is greatest for those students nudged or led towards this course at the expense of others.

Our strongest universities have warned that students who take certain subjects risk harming their chance of securing access to the best courses. Cambridge has published a list of 20 subjects which don't count as hard A-levels for the purpose of entry - including art and design, dance, film studies and media studies. The Russell Group has also warned that "students must not disadvantage themselves by choosing a combination of subjects at A-level which will not equip them as well as other subjects." All A-levels may be equal in the eyes of the Government and the QCA but as far as the universities are concerned some A levels are clearly more equal than others.

For all those of us concerned with social justice, and keen to widen access to the best universities, the most worrying aspect of the flight from quality at GCSE and A level is the way in which it harms the poorest most.

Because the growth in the number of students studying softer subjects has been driven almost entirely by an increase in the number of comprehensive and secondary modern students taking these courses.

Last year, just 479 pupils took media studies GCSE in independent schools, compared to 55,060 in comprehensives. Overall, the number of media studies GCSEs taken in comprehensives and secondary moderns accounts for 98% of the total number of entries. While the numbers taking media studies overall have risen by 17,000 in the last three years the additional number taking the exam in independent schools amounts to just 49 additional candidates.

## LABOUR EDUCATIONAL POLICY - MAKING OPPORTUNITY LESS EQUAL

A new wall is being erected in an education system already disfigured by far too many barriers placed in the way of the poorest - this wall divides the privileged from the rest, with those in independent schools pursuing more rigorous qualifications which universities and employers value most and pupils in state schools increasingly being led towards weaker qualifications which limit their opportunities.

As the Russell Group has pointed out, pupils in independent schools are three times more likely to be doing further Maths A-levels and two and a half times more likely to be doing modern languages A levels than state school pupils who're also sitting A levels. They will increasingly be doing softer subjects which give them poorer prospects.

This division between the privileged, and the rest, the few and the many, applies with particular force in science as well.

We know that the best route to success in science, the surest path to the best university courses and the best employment offers, is to take each of the individual science subjects as a distinct GCSE.

But we also know that access to the individual Physics, Chemistry and Biology GCSEs is incredibly constrained.

York University's Professor David Jesson has found that just one state school pupil in 20 is entered for GCSEs in physics, chemistry and biology. More than 2,000 comprehensives - 68 per cent of the total - can't offer their students the three science GCSEs.

And in the local Government areas of Islington, Darlington and Blackpool in 2007 not a single child took a GCSE in physics, chemistry or biology.

But there is no similar lack of opportunity in the independent sector. Pupils at independent schools are five times more likely to be entered for all three science GCSEs than their state school equivalents.

And there is another gulf emerging now as well.

More and more of the best independent schools are abandoning state run exams altogether – schools such as St Paul's and Eton either don't feature in league tables – or come bottom – because they are moving away from the GCSE towards exams – such as the International GCSE - which the Government doesn't recognise for league table purposes. And won't allow state schools to offer.

More and more independent schools believe that by offering alternatives to the state run exams – by offering not just the International GCSE but the International Baccalaureate or the new Pre-U, they can secure a real advantage for their students in the academic marketplace.

In effect, pupils from independent schools are bidding for places at our best universities with the hardest academic currency - bought for them by their parents - that can't be acceptable to any of us who believe in a genuine meritocracy.

## REAL ACCOUNTABILITY - CHOICE AND DIVERSITY

The reason independent schools offer the exam choices they do is because they know they have to convince parents that the courses they offer are the

best route to subsequent success - and if the school doesn't deliver, or its judgement is wrong, then the parents can go elsewhere. The accountability is all towards the parents - where it should be.

In the state system at the moment there isn't anything like meaningful choice. All too many parents have to simply put up with the school the local authority allocates to them and accept the education on offer there. And the head, no matter how enlightened, knows that their future success doesn't depend on pleasing anxious parents but on hitting ministerial targets. So if the choice is between offering a tougher subject which parents and students might aspire to, or going down a road towards inflating performance levels then that's no sort of choice at all.

The level of parental dissatisfaction with this lack of choice is massive - as we know from the borough of Lewisham, from which Haberdashers' Aske's Hatcham draws almost all its pupils. Half of Lewisham parents are denied their first choice of school. Which is to say that hundreds of parents can't get into Haberdashers' Aske's. They are aspirational parents, from a predominantly working class borough, who are expressing their preference for a rigorous academic education for their children. But it is an aspiration the system currently denies. And I think that's wrong.

Which is why we've developed policies to deliver real choice – and accountability - into state education.

We would give every parent the right currently only the rich have – to take their child out of a poor school and place them in a good one. We would allow any parent the right to ask for the money the local authority spends on their child - and they could take that money to any other state school willing to accept them. And to ensure they had a meaningful choice we would open up the state sector to new organisations willing to set up schools - as they have in Sweden, where 900 new schools have been established.

And we would also allow existing state schools greater freedoms to innovate - the sort of freedoms grant maintained schools had in the past and the original CTCS and academies have today.

State schools would depend on attracting parents to maintain their pupil numbers, cash flow and reputation. Just as independent schools do now. And state schools would inevitably move quickly to offer the most rigorous,

demanding and rewarding qualifications. Just as independent schools do now.

In our drive to make opportunity more equal - and raise standards for all - we would ensure that new schools were incentivised to open in areas of greater deprivation and existing schools went out of their way to attract poorer pupils by attaching more money to the education of individual pupils from poorer backgrounds. Our plans for a pupil premium would ensure that those schools which attracted a larger number of poorer children would have the additional resources to pioneer new ways of operating and the money to pay more for higher quality teaching.

And one of the crucial freedoms we would give state schools is one of the freedoms independent schools most cherish - the ability to choose the exams they offer their students from an international menu.

## FREEDOM RAISES STANDARDS

We think schools should be free to decide which exams they offer and parents free to choose which schools they think are making the best offer.

If a particular diploma is the option you think best for your child - great - your son or daughter should be able to pursue that course. But why should they be denied access to the IGCSE, the Pre-U or the IB, the courses increasingly favoured by those who have the money to buy an advantage?

One of the worst decisions the current Government has made in education, in a crowded field, was their U-turn on the IB. Tony Blair promised to make sure that access to the IB would be open to every community. But Ed Balls and Gordon Brown scrapped the funding for that ambition. It is striking, and depressing, that one of their first acts on taking over power was to deny poorer children access to the one exam which has been proven to hold its value over time. It is a decision we would reverse.

Choice is crucial to driving up standards - and not just because it allows parents and students, teachers and heads, to reverse the flight from quality and opt for more rigorous qualifications. Choice also matters because it disperses power in education. And it has been the concentration of power -

in the wrong hands - which has done so much damage to the cause of proper, rigorous, academic education in this country.

## THE WRONG IDEOLOGY - IN THE WRONG HANDS

For four decades at least now the direction of education policy in this country has been overwhelmingly driven by the preferences and prejudices of a small, self-replicating, group of academics and bureaucrats who have been in thrall to one particular ideology.

This ideology, which lay behind the recommendations of the Plowden Report, which gusted through the Department of Education when Shirley Williams held sway, which captivated university Departments of Education and bewitched those running teacher training, has become known as "progressive" educational thinking.

The truth, however, is that it is anything but progressive.

This ideology has its roots in the Romantic revolt against the classical order and the rejection of belief in Original Sin. It draws inspiration from the philosophy of Rousseau which held that children were born in a state of innocence and then corrupted by the civilization around them. Children should be left free to discover at their own pace, to follow their own hearts, to pursue those interests which enchanted them, and they should be protected from any attempt to regiment, educate or otherwise guide their development. Play is more important than memorising facts in helping young minds grow, the narrow disciplines of individual subjects is a form of petty tyranny which forces curiosity to go down pre-determined channels instead of ranging widely and a stress on the acquisition of facts is itself an outdated prejudice which denies human progress, and the reality that as we grow the facts we need to know will, inevitably, change.

This philosophy, championed in different ways, with different emphases, at different times, by John Dewey, by Jean Piaget, by Lady Plowden and by successive Department of Education luminaries has given rise to thinking which has fallen under several umbrellas, whether Progressivism, or Constructivism or Child-Centred Education. But what has united the followers of this ideology has been hostility towards traditional, academic, fact-rich, knowledge-centred, subject-based, teacher-led education.

## THE EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENT WREAKS ITS DAMAGE

The dominance of this ideology over the last forty years has driven a number of developments which have changed the shape of education...

- the move away from children sitting in rows to children sitting in grouped desks in primary schools was a post-Plowden development, driven by the belief that children should learn by discovery and collaboration with each other rather than as recipients of wisdom imparted from the teacher...

- the move away from systematic synthetic phonics to whole word and real book teaching of reading was thought to be a progressive change - driven by the belief that the dry as dust learning of individual phonemes and graphemes would only turn children off books while vivid pictures and immersion in charming stories would delight them and their untutored enthusiasm would drive them to pick up reading...

- the move away from individual subjects to cross-curricular teaching was driven by the belief - according to QCA author and Institute of Education academic John White - that subjects were out of date constructs designed by repressed 18th century protestants and learning should be constructed by pupils who navigate their own course through school...

- the move away from a curriculum built on acquiring knowledge to one in which other, more diffuse abstract outcomes are measured such as the ability to make connections, to sift evidence, to interrogate authority and so on was driven by the belief that facts are always available on the net or in books and don't need to be in your head while these abstract skills - learning how to learn - fit you for the future and the move away from the need to have a proper narrative structure of our nation's history or a proper sense of the Great Tradition of our literature was driven by the belief that what counted most in encountering the past or reading poetry was the cultivation of empathy and the assertion of relevance - events or texts had to speak to the student's own experience rather than extending it or even challenging it...

In all these areas, and more that I could mention, the influence of what we used to call progressive thinking can be seen at work.

## THE REVOLUTION BETRAYED

Indeed the success of this way of looking at education has been so powerful because its followers have done what the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci urged on his followers - they have conducted a long march through the institutions. From educational journals to government departments, university faculties to venerable thinktanks, the orthodoxy of the education establishment, what was once called "The Blob" has moved relentlessly forward.

There have been attempts to check it - by politicians of Left and Right - from Ken Baker to David Blunkett - but the establishment, like the Empire, has always fought back.

The irony of the establishment's position, though, is that even though it has advanced using the tactics Gramsci recommended for revolutionaries it has ended up entrenching the policies that real progressives such as Gramsci actually opposed.

Gramsci, in his Prison Notebooks, outlined his own deep opposition to the so-called progressive educational thinking of his time. He saw it as a way of denying the poor access to the knowledge which the rich had always enjoyed - and said as much with great pungency -

"The new concept of schooling," he wrote, "is in its romantic phase, in which the replacement of mechanical by natural methods has become unhealthily exaggerated... previously pupils at least acquired a certain baggage of concrete facts. Now there will no longer be any baggage to put in order... the most paradoxical aspect of it all is that this new type of school is advocated as being democratic, while in fact it is destined not merely to perpetuate social differences but crystallise them in Chinese complexities."

Gramsci's key insight - that educational methods which call themselves progressive are actually regressive in social terms - has been borne out by time.

## HOW THE ESTABLISHMENT BETRAYED THE POOREST

The abandonment of a desk and seating arrangement which seemed unduly regimented has actually removed a crucial aspect of order, discipline and hierarchy from the lives of children - for those children who grow up in ordered, secure and stable homes the loss is less but for those who grow up in disordered, chaotic and difficult surroundings the sacrifice is greater. The one place where they could work quietly, where facts could be transmitted calmly and order was assured has gone in a welter of wallchart construction and chatterbox partners.

Similarly, with reading. Those children who did, and do, grow up in book rich homes with parents reading the bedtime story every evening will, sooner or later, get to grips with literacy. But those children from backgrounds where reading is less central, with fewer books and time-pressured, poorer, parents need the structure and order of learning to read through a systematic synthetic phonics programme. We know from the longitudinal studies carried out Clackmannanshire and the work done in West Dunbartonshire, both poorer areas, that synthetic phonics can practically eliminate illiteracy. But in those schools where phonics teaching is not systematic children, especially from poorer backgrounds, continue to fall behind.

And also with the abandonment of subject disciplines, the poorer lose out again. As the Times Educational Supplement reported this week those comprehensive schools which have most enthusiastically abandoned specific subject teaching for a more flexible, porous, curriculum, have seen their standards and performance drop. Richer parents who can afford it access specific subject teaching earlier rather than later with the most successful prep schools introducing discrete subjects taught by subject specialists before pupils go on to secondary education.

I do very much hope that Professor Jim Rose is backed in his plans for more specific subject teaching in our primaries but it worries me that the whole thrust of the new Key Stage Three curriculum is against subject disciplines and towards collapsing curriculum distinctions.

And again, the move away from fact-based learning, the shift away from seeing education as a process of acquiring knowledge and towards more broadly-sketched "outcomes" is actually a regressive move. Knowledge,

intellectual capital, is what makes educational progress possible. We learn by using existing knowledge to construct models, parallels, paradigms and analogies which enable us to grasp new concepts and insights.

A knowledge of basic evolutionary theory is necessary before we can make real sense of genetics, biology or brain science.

A knowledge of classical myth, of Biblical chronology, of Greek and Roman history enables us properly to understand Shakespeare, Milton, Renaissance art, most great oratory and indeed almost everything sublime in Western culture.

A knowledge of the French Revolution helps us understand the Russian - and a knowledge of how all past totalitarian ideologies work helps us understand contemporary equivalents - such as Islamic fundamentalism.

Knowledge is the mother, father and midwife of understanding – totally indispensable. For those who grow up in homes rich in knowledge, where conversation is laced with learning and childhood curiosity is easily satisfied, future learning is made easier, deeper understanding comes more readily.

For those of us who were not brought up in such homes the need for an education rich in facts and respectful of knowledge is all the greater. And that is why I am so grateful I was given one. Without it my opportunities would have been much more limited, my horizons narrowed, my prejudices left entrenched and unchallenged.

And, finally, there is something particularly reactionary about an education which does not give our citizens a proper knowledge of our Island Story and the Great Tradition of our literature. Full participation in the common life of our nation depends on a deep understanding of its traditions, past and inherited culture. It is a tragedy that understanding is so shallow, and growing more fugitive...

The current history curriculum does not provide students with a coherent sense of the narrative of British history. Ofsted has reported that "pupils knowledge and understanding of key historical facts is not good enough; their knowledge is fragmented. Young people's knowledge is very often patchy and specific, they are unable to sufficiently link discrete historical

events to answer big questions, form overviews and demonstrate strong conceptual understanding. Young people's sense of chronology is relatively weak and they are generally unable to relate a longer narrative of the story of Britain."

Key Stage Three – the first three years of secondary education – is supposed to furnish students with a working knowledge of British history, but despite the best efforts of history teachers that just isn't happening. The pressure placed on school timetables by a proliferating range of obligations means that many schools are opting to fit the Key Stage Three History Curriculum into just two years. That means many students stop learning about history at 13.

A study by a group of academics for Anglia Ruskin university revealed that very few pupils are ever taught anything about the late Middle Ages, the creation of Parliament, the Wars of the Roses or the period broadly from the Restoration to the French Revolution. So crucial events in the history of Britain, and British institution-building, like the Glorious Revolution or the Act of Union, are foreign to most students.

Again, as Ofsted has pointed out, "in practice some events are treated very lightly, if at all. Some aspects that are taught in depth are not set in broader contexts." There is a "focus on limited areas of history without overall coherence".

Recently, London University asked a number of GCSE History students, that's to say those 16-year-olds who had deliberately chosen to pursue historical study, to write an account of British history over the last 2,000 years.

As the academic leading the study reported, "Some of the students simply couldn't do so. They said things like, "I wasn't born yet so I can't remember" or they did not even attempt to answer the question...Many listed topics and events.. like The Industrial Revolution without any particular order to the list and with no distinction made between the items listed. A few students tried to construct an "and then" narrative starting usually with the Battle of Hastings and simply bolting on events thereafter. This effort always ended abruptly at the point where it became clear that the task ahead was enormous or due to the emergence of significant knowledge gaps."

How can it be, in any proper sense of the word, progressive to leave the next generation so ignorant of the events and institutions which make us what we are and gave us our freedoms?

In all the areas I have drawn attention to the effect of progressive theory on education has been entirely regressive - and that is why David Cameron has made challenging such thinking - taking on the educational establishment - central to the programme for the next Conservative Government.

### WHAT IS EDUCATION FOR - MAKING THE SERVANTS MASTERS...

I stressed earlier that these wrong turnings were the consequence of the capture of key institutions by a small, and unrepresentative, minority.

It is my belief that if the structure of education and the shape of the curriculum in our schools were truly responsive to parents - instead of being shaped by the educational establishment - we would see the disappearance of what was once called progressive thinking in all save a few redoubts.

Because the evidence shows that whenever parents have a choice – a real choice - they choose traditional, rigorous, academic education for their children. That is why those with money make the choices they do.

That is why those who can lay siege to our very best comprehensives - Mossbourne, the Harris Academies in South London, Haberdashers' Aske's Hatcham.

Our policies are driven by the urgent need to extend that choice to many more, and especially to the most disadvantaged in areas of greatest need.

Of course, if I am wrong in my judgment about what parents want then the beauty of our reforms is that parents will be able to show me what they want - our changes will give them control and make schools accountable to their demands.

But something tells me that my hunch isn't wrong - that given the freedom to choose most parents will reject what the establishment has been telling them they must have for the last forty years - and that is why the establishment will fight our policies so hard, and with such tenacity. They aren't allow

control to slip from the hands of the bureaucracy they control and influence into the hands of parents.

But that is exactly where I want to see exercised.

The greatest prizes the next century has to offer will go to those individuals, and institutions, which have the greatest freedom to change, adapt and evolve. Flexibility in working, open-ness to innovation from others and adaptability so improvement can be continuous are preconditions of success.

A centralised, bureaucratic, one-size-fits-all, don't change till we tell you, don't get ahead of yourself now sonny, attitude is the enemy of progress – especially in education.

In the ever more complex, runaway world we inhabit, the only way to stay ahead is to have a decentralised, flexible way of working, which allows for rapid adaptation. A rigidly bureaucratic – command and control – model is simply incapable of generating the sort of innovations we need to stay ahead.

I began this talk by asking what is education for - I argued that education was, above all, about giving people the chance to take control of their own lives - to be authors of their own life story - and as I have argued tonight the best way to make that ambition a reality is to give control over education to the people who really matter – to parents and students.

The purpose of education after all is emancipation - the liberation of the mind from the shackles of ignorance - and the purpose of our education policy is emancipation - the liberation of the next generation from the shackles of a policy, and an establishment, that has failed.

**18 November 2008**