

Gove: Freeing good schools to help the most disadvantaged

Shadow Children's Secretary Michael Gove will today outline proposals to free hundreds of good comprehensives from bureaucratic control by allowing them to become autonomous, non-selective Academies, with the freedom to innovate, and with control over their budgets, curriculum and discipline. They will also help other underperforming institutions raise standards as a condition of this new freedom.

The plans mean that the Conservatives could help create hundreds of new academies. As well as empowering parents to set up Swedish-style New Academies, independence from bureaucratic control would become the norm for our secondary schools.

Speaking to the Conservative Party conference in Birmingham today, Michael Gove will say:

"We will give the best of our comprehensive schools the chance to free themselves from bureaucracy to enjoy full academy freedoms. We expect to double the number of academies currently planned. We will be on course for academies to become the norm in secondary education.

"An independent state school accessible to every community, open to all but committed to excellence, free to pursue tougher discipline policies, free to pay good teachers more, free to innovate experiment and drive up standards – that is our ambition.

"And in return for greater freedom we shall ask these excellent schools to use their new powers to help under-performing schools. We'll ask every new academy to team up with a school which needs extra support – the innovations pioneered in the best schools will be deployed to drive up standards in the poorest.

“We are utterly determined to focus our policies on all those who are deprived of aspiration, deprived of opportunity, deprived of hope. And it’s because we believe background should not be destiny, that being born into disadvantage should not mean being deprived of a future, that we want to spread opportunity more widely.”

Notes to Editors

The problem

Two years ago, Labour promised that all state sector, non-fee-paying schools would be given independence and the freedom to innovate and develop in the way they chose.[1][1] But they have done the reverse: they have curtailed schools’ freedoms and failed to offer the leadership needed to expand the Academies programme.

- Under DCSF guidance issued in 2007, Ed Balls has reversed the freedoms Academies had over delivering their curricula.
- Academies have lost their freedoms over staff recruitment and independence from LEA control.[2][2]
- Hundreds of good comprehensives are now enmeshed in local and national bureaucracy, unable to innovate or maximise the creativity of their staff and leaders.

Freedom for excellence

Excellent comprehensives which achieve the best for their pupils should be rewarded and encouraged with greater freedoms from bureaucratic interference. We will:

- Allow the hundreds of schools that have demonstrated their performance and leadership to be given the opportunity to become Academies. They would immediately be freed from local authority control.
- Allow those schools, as non-selective Academies, to have greater freedom over their discipline policies and the freedom to depart from the National Curriculum.
- Give them control over their budgets. Free from local authority control, these schools could expect to have an extra 10–15 per cent funding that would otherwise have gone to the local authority.

We would aim to make independence from bureaucratic control the norm for British secondary schools.

Responsibility: helping disadvantaged schools

Schools would be asked to submit, as part of their application to become an Academy, a plan to partner an underperforming school. It would be for the school to define the nature of that help and present their plan to the Secretary of State. Instead of a top-down approach to failure, we wish to begin a bottom-up process of social responsibility. In this way, the best schools and teachers will have the freedom to innovate. If a school did not wish to take on these responsibilities, it would not be granted Academy freedoms.

Many excellent schools are already investing in increasing the educational opportunities of the most disadvantaged – for example, Haberdashers' Aske's Hatcham College, a former CTC in Lewisham which has taken a local underperforming primary school under its wing. Our proposals would give excellent schools the freedom to innovate in the ways they know best, raising the performance of those schools that are struggling nearby.

Thomas Telford School in Telford is a City Academy and consistently the best performing comprehensive in the country. It has played a role in setting up two Academies, and subsequently established a foundation with the worst-performing school in Telford, Madeley Court School. This federation transformed Madeley Court's fortunes, with the number of pupils gaining five GCSEs at grades A*–C including English and Maths rising from 16 per cent to 48 per cent.

The Swedish system

We have already set out some of our plans to reverse the decline in behaviour and standards in our schools, and give all parents the power that only richer parents have – the power to ensure their child goes to a good school.

In our Green Paper we set out how we would achieve those aims – by making schools accountable to parents. We would allow education specialists – charities, philanthropists, existing federations and groups of parents – to set up new schools as an alternative to failing schools. Any parent would be able to apply to such schools on a 'first come first served' basis.[3][3]

We want all parents – regardless of wealth – to be given that power. That is why we have announced dedicated extra spending for pupils who come from more disadvantaged homes in the form of a pupil premium.

We are confident this will raise standards – in Sweden 15 per cent of children are educated in free, independent state schools. Standards have risen in those new schools, *and* in other state schools.

Our new announcement is the next step in giving all schools and teachers the freedom to innovate and adapt to parental demand.

The full text of the speech is below:

(check against delivery)

“These are tough times.

And they demand straight talk.

In a moment I'm going to do four things.

Explain what's wrong with our education system.

Show how this Government is making things worse.

Explain the principles that guide our approach to improvement.

And outline our plans to improve the nation's schools.

The immediate steps we will take to improve the situation.

And the long term reforms which we desperately need.

But first I want to underline why the need for change in this country is imperative

In 1979 this country faced a moment of decision –

Our nation was enmeshed a profound economic and political crisis.

The choice was stark.

The Labour Government said trust the man with experience.

But what we had experienced under a Labour Government was ballooning debt, galloping inflation and rising unemployment.

So Britain chose –

As we have so often in the past at moments of crisis –

To change course, to throw the complacent establishment out.

And embrace the politics of hope – not fear...

And we elected in Margaret Thatcher someone equal to the times, because she knew that the old ways of working would no longer be enough.

And she put Britain back on the road to recovery.

And just as this nation was right to change in 1979, so change is urgent now...

Last week we were told that we were being led by the pilot who could weather the storm.

But listening to Gordon Brown it sounded more like a satnav that's stuck in the past.

For every challenge there was one message.

At the next point of decision – turn sharp left.

But it's been the politics of the left and the politicians of the left who have got us into this mess –

And now the country needs a new approach from the party of the modern mainstream.

Worrying, however, as Labour's lurch back to the left has been – the most chilling thing about last week was not the re-run of history – it was the total absence of humility.

Gordon Brown has been Chancellor for the last ten years and he spoke for fifty minutes about the massive problems our economy now faces and used the word "regret" only once – when talking about the damage to his reputation.

As far as the damage the rest of us faced – his message is je ne regrette rien...

I don't know about you but I don't think you can treat the British public like that.

The individuals who lost out from the abolition of the ten p tax rate.

The school dinner ladies, the hospital cleaners, the nursery teachers.

They don't exist just to have their incomes slashed by Gordon Brown so he can trumpet a bogus tax cut in a con trick budget.

They're people not props...

And they've been let down so badly by this Government they're in despair.

Let us ensure if we are fortunate enough to be entrusted with office by the British people that we never forget we are here to serve –

And those who need our help most are those in our society who have least.

I am convinced that we desperately need new leadership for new challenges.

And I know the failure to prepare us for the future has been profound in education.

What's wrong with our schools?

Well to hear ministers talk you'd think all was for the best in the best of all possible worlds – and all thanks to them.

But if you talk to stressed children, worried parents or frazzled teachers then a very different picture emerges.

Under Labour Britain's gone backwards...our children have been left behind....and the time for change is now.

We are falling behind in every international measure of educational performance.

In the last ten years we've dropped.

From 4th to 14th in measurements of school science performance.

From 7th to 17th in literacy.

And from 8th to 24th in mathematics.

Forty per cent of children leave primary school unable to read write and add up properly.

Nearly two million children have left school in the last ten years without even a single proper pass at GCSE to their name.

But even these bleak statistics – the drumbeat of decline – scarcely do justice to the scale of our problems

Even as we fall behind other countries the gap between the richest and the poorest in our own country is growing wider.

And as children go through school its the poor who fall further and further behind.

Last week Gordon Brown said Britain was ready for .

"the next great wave of social mobility".

Ready, Gordon? We're desperate.

For the last ten years, under Labour, social mobility has become frozen in Britain and opportunity has been blocked.

It must be our mission to change that. A society in which the poor are condemned to stay poor because a failing education system offers no way out is a society no Conservative can tolerate.

But our task is formidable.

Children everywhere are increasingly failed by a curriculum and exam system which squeezes out curiosity, suppresses originality, and stifles creativity.

As a nation we now spend more on exams than books in our schools.

And even as the number of tests and exams proliferate the place of real, rigorous, knowledge in learning is undermined.

In our national science tests we ask 14 year olds.

"Which part of a rider's anatomy does a riding hat protect?"

In our Science GCSEs we ask 16 year olds.

"Do we look at the stars through a microscope, a xylophone, a synthesiser or a telescope".

You can get a good pass mark in these exams with only a third of the answers correct.

No wonder our top universities now say they have to run remedial courses for freshers because after thirteen years in school students still don't know enough to embark on science courses which students from other countries take in their stride.

How can a government which calls itself progressive have presided over such a tragic situation?

It must be our mission to inject common sense into our examination system so we have fewer, better, more rigorous exams.

Because we cannot go on as we are.

But this Government's real failure in education goes far far deeper than that.

This Government's fundamental mistake is trying to centralise, control and bully their way to better performance –

They don't believe that professionals should have the freedom to inspire young minds.

They don't believe you deserve a real choice over how your children are educated.

They don't believe that anyone should deviate from the diktats laid down in Whitehall.

The result has been thousands of teachers leaving the profession in despair, tens of thousands of parents disappointed in their choice of school and hundreds of thousands of children educated in under-performing schools.

Under a Conservative Government teachers who want more professional freedom and parents who want more good schools won't be powerless and frustrated.

They will be our allies in driving up standards everywhere...

As a parent I know that good discipline is the foundation of any successful school.

Unless you have an ordered environment teachers cannot teach and children cannot learn.

So on day one we would legislate to give teachers new powers to keep order.

We will also give every head teacher the right to exclude violent and disruptive pupils – without being second guessed by an outside bureaucracy.

The current system – which allows boys expelled for carrying knives to challenge heads in court and then swagger back into school will end –

Under a Conservative government heads will be captains of their ship – authority will be respected – discipline will be restored.

And we will go further in our determination to improve discipline and raise attainment in our schools.

We want to reach those at risk of exclusion before they fall through society's safety net.

I've been looking at how we can help get young lives back on track and I've been hugely impressed by the work many people do. But one organisation stands out.

Skillforce is a fantastic social enterprise which takes trained personnel from the armed forces and deploys them in schools. They teach self-discipline, team work and respect for others. The results are stunning – adolescents who were going off the rails are now going on to further education.

Under a Conservative Government we will make sure that the sort of training the armed forces can provide is available to young people across the country in our areas of greatest need.

And we won't stop there. We will ensure that ex-servicemen and women who want to work with young people in need can move quickly to a career in teaching. And we will ensure they are qualified to the highest level.

In 1945 the American government honoured the men and women who'd fought against fascism – the greatest generation – with a piece of legislation – the GI Bill – which granted returning heroes the right to free university tuition.

The young men and women serving in Afghanistan and Iraq are the heroes of our time – their sacrifices in the cause of freedom make them the greatest of our generation – and they deserve the thanks of all of us.

That is why a Conservative Government will honour their service by guaranteeing them the right to free university tuition.

Action to get more good people into teaching is vital.

But we also need to take action on the curriculum.

And in the first few weeks of a Conservative Government we'll clear things up.

Instead of a massively prescriptive, overly bureaucratic, politically correct mish mash of conflicting priorities and directives we'll have a simple document outlining what children need to be taught.

It will emphasise the need for mastery of the basics – English, Maths and Science.

And we'll also demand that history is taught properly once more...for truly progressive reasons.

Modern Britain is multi-ethnic and much the better for it.

And it is precisely because of our tradition of liberty that so many have made Britain their home.

Which is why it is so tragic that the history of how Britain became the home of liberty isn't taught in our schools.

Instead of being taught about Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution and the heroic role of the Royal Navy in putting down slavery, our children are either taught to put Britain in the dock or they remain in ignorance of our island story.

That is morally wrong, culturally self-defeating and we would put it right.

Under a Conservative Government the history curriculum would make it possible once more for children to take pride in our past – the best way we can build Britishness is by making every child aware of the great things we as Britons have achieved –

And also – in our first few months – we'll take action to put adventure back into learning. If we are worried about raising a generation of obese children nothing will be as effective as getting them active. That means expeditions, school trips and competitive sports.

But many of these activities are made almost impossible by red tape. So we will act to give teachers the power to take children beyond their comfort zone by sweeping away absurd health and safety regulations which attempt to squeeze all risk out of life.

Uniting every thing we will do is one principle – cut out the guff, the bureaucracy, the box-ticking and get common sense back into the classroom.

And when it comes to common sense no one knows better what's in children's best interests than their parents.

Our long term plans for reform are built on trusting parents, as well as liberating professionals.

Which is why a Conservative Government would legislate in our first Queen's Speech to give every parent the right that currently only the rich have – to take their child out of a failing school and place them in a good one.

We would follow the example of social democratic Sweden.

Where parents choose schools instead of schools choosing parents.

As we outline today in our social reform plan – and as you may have seen in the film we showed earlier – Sweden has driven up standards in all its schools by making one crucial change.

Any parent can take the money the Government currently spends on their child's education and take that money to the school they want.

Parents who have been unhappy with existing local authority schools have found new schools have been set up to give them a better alternative.

Nine hundred new schools have been established – by foundations, charities, co-operatives and others – and they have attracted pupils by offering better discipline and higher standards. These schools have gone out of their way to give parents what they want.

Imagine it – state schools leafletting your road – selling themselves to parents on the basis of their great teaching and the superb pastoral care they offer.

The consequence in Sweden has been not just higher standards in the new schools but higher standards in all schools as every school has to do its best to satisfy parents.

Competition has ensured that schools which were once failing are now magnets for parents who had no hope.

Conservative means have guaranteed progressive ends.

And we would guarantee that our changes always helped the poorest most. We would give parents from poorer backgrounds more money to spend on their children's education. We would deliberately target the areas of greatest disadvantage to ensure the best new schools opened where they were needed most.

That is Modern Compassionate Conservatism – taking on the establishment in the interests of the poorest –

And we would go further – in spreading both freedom and opportunity.

We know from history – from our history – that comprehensive schools are in the best position to achieve excellence when they are freed from suffocating bureaucracy and given the chance to shape their own destiny.

The success of grant-maintained schools in the nineties was proof that freedom worked.

Under Labour many of those freedoms were abolished.

But in his final years in power Tony Blair became a death-bed convert to the cause of educational freedom. He set up the academy programme – a deliberate attempt to emulate the success of GM schools. And it worked – academies used their newfound freedom to drive up standards.

Since Gordon Brown took over those freedoms have been stifled and bureaucracy has crept back. There is a real danger that the opportunities academies promise could be tragically curtailed.

But we won't let that happen.

Not only will we restore to schools all the freedoms they've lost, we'll dramatically expand freedom for professionals.

We will give the best of our comprehensive schools the chance to free themselves from bureaucracy to enjoy full academy freedoms.

We expect to double the number of academies currently planned –

we will be on course for academies to become the norm in secondary education.

An independent state school accessible to every community, open to all but committed to excellence, free to pursue tougher discipline policies, free to pay good teachers more, free to innovate experiment and drive up standards – that is our ambition.

And in return for greater freedom we shall ask these excellent schools to use their new powers to help under-performing schools. We'll ask every new academy to team up with a school which needs extra support – the innovations pioneered in the best schools will be deployed to drive up standards in the poorest.

We are utterly determined to focus our policies on all those who are deprived of aspiration, deprived of opportunity, deprived of hope.

And its because we believe background should not be destiny, that being born into disadvantage should not mean being deprived of a future, that we want to spread opportunity more widely.

That has always been the historic mission of our party.

We are at our best when we are radicals – progressives – challenging establishments, standing up for individuals against vested interests, providing hope for the voiceless and the vulnerable.

And at this time we can best achieve our progressive goal of making opportunity more equal by truly conservative means.

Trusting professionals,

empowering parents,

and liberating the strong to help the weak...

And if we trust to those values – and fight for them with conviction – then we can give this country the change it needs.

We can bring educational excellence to communities written off by Labour.

We can bring hope to parents denied a way out by Labour.

We can bring opportunity to children denied hope by Labour.

We can bring an end to ten years of extravagance, arrogance and failure.

It's a prize worth fighting for – so let's ensure we're entirely focused on winning – for Britain.”

ENDS