

Bad science, worse politics

Gove is absolutely committed to the neoliberal agenda of pushing schools into private management as academies and free schools. He is also driven by nostalgia for traditional teaching and content (grammar tests, his ‘glorious heritage’ view of English history, etc), and propped up by special advisers who substitute elitist ideologies for the educational knowledge they lack.

Early in October, a document from Michael Gove’s top adviser Dominic Cummings was leaked to the Guardian. It reveals some of the strange ideas driving Government policy – ideas which even Gove can’t openly admit.

The national press highlighted the return of that old belief that intelligence is largely fixed and genetic. (See the linked article later in this issue *The zombie theory of innate IQ*)

The leaked document exploits this idea to justify the Government’s axing hundreds of Sure Start children’s centres for the poorest and most disadvantaged children. According to Cummings’ logic, these parents are poor because they are stupid, and pass on stupidity genes to their own children, so it is pointless trying to help them.

This sits oddly, of course, with Gove’s constant attempt to blame teachers for the achievement gap. Both myths serve, though, to absolve the Government from its responsibility for child poverty, in an age when the rich get richer while politicians preach Austerity.

However, Cummings’ 240 page rant is about more than IQ. Here is a virtuoso but incoherent display of intellectual superiority, covering everything from astronomy to particle theory, advanced maths to business leadership. Periodically among all this, bizarre proposals pop up for how to run the country’s schools. It is hard at first to see how the topics are linked, but there are connecting threads.

There is, as we might expect, a deep contempt for teachers and their work. There is the belief that inequality is inevitable and justified. Finally, the document is permeated with a deep anxiety that the world economy is in crisis and only an elite of super-intelligent individuals can save it.

The world certainly is in crisis but Cummings’ solution is like the crude plot of the science fiction film *Ender’s Game* - the search for a boy genius who will stop an alien invasion. (No, that’s not a Daily Mail editorial!)

There are many inconsistencies. He repeatedly claims that expectations and achievement are far too low for large numbers of children: “The education of the majority even in rich countries is between awful and mediocre.” However, Cummings’ is obsessed with identifying the cleverest 1 in 10,000 children, and then supercharging their education. He even presents a reading list for his supermen

and (maybe) superwomen: their education will consist of advanced mathematics and modern physics; genetic theories of IQ and the brain; a few books about economics, leadership and complex systems; and military strategy.

Cummings claims that teachers in state schools are generally mediocre – his favourite word. He recognizes that teacher education recruits high achievers in Finland and Singapore, but says that would be impossible in England because teaching is so unattractive. (Whose fault that then?) There is no point in teacher training, just give heads greater powers to sack. In fact, the model he provides for improving classroom practice is unbelievably crude - online training videos by Doug Lemov the boss of a US Charter School chain, with titles such as “Strong voice”, “Precise praise” and “Cold calling”. (page 80)

“Real talent is rare, mediocrity ubiquitous. Whilst heads need to be flexible enough to allow talented people to experiment, we also need schools in chains that spread proven approaches (and 90% solutions) without relying on innovation, inspiration and talent. Direct Instruction is generally ignored in English education debates despite its proven effectiveness.” (page 81)

This is an amazing claim, since government policy for the past twenty years has pushed teachers relentlessly towards direct instruction and away from student-centred interactive methods. Despite all the rhetoric from Gove and Wilshaw about wanting to make English schools ‘world-class’, Cummings clearly favours McDonald-style quality control – uniformly delivered burgers which avoid food-poisoning, whatever their long-term effects on your health.

Elitist philosophy

Cummings’ favourite philosopher is Nietzsche, whose dream of creating a Superman inspired Hitler. The document includes a rambling page-long quotation, where Nietzsche promises that, although we have experienced the “levelling and mediocritizing of man”, we will also see “exceptional men of the most dangerous and enticing quality.” While the “herd” will consist of “multifarious, garrulous, weak-willed and highly employable workers who need a master, a commander, as they need their daily bread...a type prepared for slavery in the subtlest sense: in individual and exceptional cases the strong man will be found to turn out stronger and richer than has perhaps ever happened before.” (pages 129-130). This is dangerous proto-fascist thinking.

Of the Greek philosophers, he ditches Socrates in favour of his nemesis Callicles who “rejected all conventional ideas about justice and virtue.” The document quotes and paraphrases: “Nature shows that ... the superior rule the inferior and have a greater share than they”. The majority “like getting an equal share, since they are inferior” and they unsurprisingly wish to restrain the superior, those

with intelligence and courage. Therefore the weak and inferior define justice as the restraint of greed and use *nomos* (custom, law) to help them control the superior. *Nomos* is, therefore, a mere convention of the weak and inferior ... The superior man, he “whose nature is equal to it”, should trample the *nomos* of the inferior that violates nature’s law and vent on the world his “wantonness, lack of discipline, and freedom... [which] are excellence and happiness.” (page 203)

Very much the philosophy of the present government!

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