

From “Education, Education, Education” to “Freedom, Fairness and Responsibility”

— the rapidly changing scenario in English education following the general election —

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Good afternoon, everybody. I am extremely grateful to you all for your kind invitation to join you in Kyoto for your conference. My wife, Susan, and I have been made extremely welcome since our arrival in your beautiful city and we both have been overwhelmed by the depth of your kindness and the concern for our well-being.

It was Robert Kennedy, speaking in Cape Town in 1966, who made famous the phrase “We live in interesting times”. Well, he most certainly could have been referring to educational policy in the United Kingdom, and England especially, since the general election and the coming to power of the first coalition government that I have known in my lifetime. Everyday during the past month there seems to have been a new announcement, with early legislation being pushed through parliament at break-neck speed. So, whilst apologising to those of you who must have been a little frustrated at the delay in receiving a copy of my speech, I hope you will understand that it was done with the best intent and in the hope that I might present you with the most up-to-date and accurate picture.

I am here in my role of President of the Association of School and College Leaders in the United Kingdom. It was a great pleasure to welcome Komatu-san to our national conference in London in March. With the Prime Minister about to call the general election, it was a conference containing rather more political content than usual, but, given the closeness of the vote and the centrality of education policy in the national debate, I hope Komatu-san found it as enjoyable as I did.

The substantive element of my address today will be to reflect on the educational legacy of the Blair and Brown governments over the past 13 years. I will then follow this with an up-to-date summary of the early educational policy implementation steps of the Cameron government. This new Conservative/Liberal Democrat government has chosen to make its first flagship piece of legislation an education bill, the Academies Bill, which has been rushed through parliament and

onto the statute book.

Before I move on to talk about my main theme today, the rapidly changing education scenario in England, I thought you may find it interesting, firstly, to hear a little about ASCL itself and, secondly, how we operate on behalf of our members.

The Association for School and College Leaders, UK

For 25 years, from 1980, we have represented the majority of secondary school leaders under the banner of SHA, the Secondary Heads Association. During this time the balance of our membership reflected the changing make-up of school and college leadership teams, as headteachers were joined by deputy headteachers, assistant headteachers and, most recently, school business managers. In 2005 our name caught up with our membership and we became known, more accurately, as the Association of School and College Leaders. We now have 15000 members, of whom 1000 are school business managers in leadership roles.

We are not affiliated to any political party, but are a member-led association with a national council made up entirely of serving school and college leaders. Our first priority will always be to support our members through 4 ways:

- Regional Officers who deal with casework supporting individual members in their area
- Legal protection, giving reassurance of legal and financial support to individuals should it be necessary
- Local and national representation, influencing local and national educational policy development
- Web-site, hotline, mailings, magazine, e-mail newsletter, guidance and policy papers, keeping members informed on the key issues related to school and college leaders.

We are the only teacher union in the country whose membership is growing. This is partly due to the increase in the range of school leadership roles, with non-teaching school business managers being our fastest growing sector. I believe it is also because, during the time of Dr John Dunford as our General Secretary, we have become the most effective education lobby group by following a consistent and constructive approach to influencing public policy

Changing public policy.

Our approach can be summarised as:

- Deciding the priority areas - our Public Policy Agenda: what are the top few (we chose

six this year) priorities on which we should campaign?

- Clarifying the message: Our aims for these priorities and the main messages for each priority
- Building alliances: who are ASCL's allies on each policy area, named individuals, not organisations?
- Influencing the decision makers: who is the key decision-maker on each issue and who will influence him/her?

Such an approach has served us well during the previous 13 years of a Labour government during which time there has been far more consultation before policy has been announced. The new government ministers say they wish to continue working with representative associations.

This year our public policy agenda was also our election manifesto which we all carried around in our pockets. In order to set the context for the next section of my talk, let me share with you those areas which, for our members, were deemed to be of the highest priority as we approached the general election.

1 Education strategy – trust and collaboration

- There should be greater trust in the teaching profession by recognising the professionalism of teachers to make judgements on professional matters.
- ASCL welcomes more freedom and autonomy for individual institutions but this should be linked to incentives to work in partnership.
- Academies can help to raise aspiration and attainment in areas of deprivation but must cooperate with their local schools and colleges as full members of the local family of schools.
- School and college leaders should have a greater influence on policy to improve the education system and raise standards.
- Parental engagement is an important element of school improvement which is a two way relationship and parents should be encouraged to take responsibility for their children, supporting school policies.

2 Curriculum – relevant and personalised

- The more flexible and less prescriptive Key Stage 3 curriculum (for 11-14 year olds) is very welcome and this approach should be extended to other phases of the curriculum.
- There is a need for genuine vocational routes through apprenticeships, Foundation Learning Tier and stand-alone qualifications.
- The practical and applied aspects in some diploma lines should be increased in order to

ensure they meet the original objectives of the programme.

- A general diploma along the lines of the current Welsh Baccalaureate, which incorporates a wide range of academic and vocational qualifications, should be developed.
- Students should be encouraged to express their views as an important strand in developing their learning, community involvement and leadership skills.

3 Assessment – rigorous and manageable

- There should be greater reliance on teacher assessment at all ages carried out rigorously by qualified and licensed chartered assessors; this should replace some external examinations.
- Steps should be taken to reduce the cost of external assessment from the current £700 million per year.
- There should continue to be external assessment of student achievement at age 11.
- The application process for higher education should take place after students have their actual grades (known as post-qualification application, or PQA) thus promoting a fair and open application process.

4 Accountability – robust and fair

- The school and college accountability system should take into account a wide range of factors, not just the narrow measures of attainment currently used to create performance tables.
- There should be a fair and balanced set of measures to inform parents about the quality of education in schools. These measures should publicly recognise schools doing well in very challenging circumstances.
- The inspection system should be a validation of school and college self-evaluation, proportionate to the institution's success.
- Accountability measures should promote collaboration between schools and colleges.
- The frequent change in the inspection framework is a destabilising influence and a period of stability in the inspection regime is required.

5 Autonomy – national framework, local flexibility

- 'National framework; local flexibility' should apply in many areas of education policy. Whilst national expectations should be set, in consultation with the profession, schools should be able to customise and implement the appropriate approaches in their local contexts.
- Giving greater autonomy to schools and colleges over professional matters will enhance

creativity within the sector and promote the personalisation of learning pathways for young people.

- There should be the very minimum of statutory obligations placed on schools and colleges and a significant reduction in the bureaucracy affecting them.
- The days of national strategies, teams of consultants, and inflexible measures should end and be replaced by schools and colleges working together in partnerships, collectively taking responsibility for the education of all the young people in their area.
- Secondary schools and colleges do best without undue external interference from local authorities; however there are a few key elements of provision such as school places, admissions and transport that require local authority coordination.
- The local authority role should be one of ensuring that there are joined-up local services to support frontline institutions with well co-ordinated welfare and support services for young people who need them
- Local authorities should be commissioners of support to schools as identified through school self-evaluation and the work of the school improvement partner.

6 Resources – sufficient and equitable

- While ASCL recognises the need for efficiency, the government must maintain real terms increases in funding in order that schools and colleges can respond to the increasing demands on them.
- There should be a fair distribution of funding across the country so that young people are not disadvantaged because of their postcode.
- The funding formulae should be based on the cost of funding the activities undertaken by schools and colleges (called an activity-led formula) ensuring that there is appropriate funding to meet the educational needs of all students.
- The funding formula should be supplemented by clearly understandable additional funding for low prior attainment, deprivation and additional area costs.
- There should be a continued commitment to improving significantly school and college buildings through the Building Schools for the Future and Building Colleges for the Future scheme.
- The pay structure for school and college leaders should be changed to reflect the responsibilities of the increasing range of leadership roles.

So these were our priorities and, through our five main committees: Funding; Pay and Conditions; Professional; Education; Public and Parliamentary, we identified the key decision-makers (often a government minister or a high-ranking civil servant.) Then we compiled a list of those who might be influential in helping him or her make decisions (more junior civil servants in the

education department or the treasury, parliamentary advisers, chief inspectors). Next came our list of allies (other teacher associations, university academics, educational bloggers). And what did we do with these lists. Well, we met and spoke to as many of them as possible, as often as possible; we wrote articles spreading the same messages; our general secretary was the year's most quoted educationalist in the press.

And it paid off, most notably when the general election caused the last education bill to be rushed through parliament, with only those parts agreed by all parties making it onto the statute book. Every piece of proposed legislation that did not get through, we had campaigned against and the opposition parties had heard and agreed with us. It was a great day for ASCL but, more importantly, it was excellent news for our members who did not have to implement more unnecessary legislation!

Labour's Legacy after 13 years

Life changed on 6 May, or more precisely 12 May because it took six days for the Conservative/Liberal democrat coalition government to be formed and for Michael Gove to be appointed the new secretary of state for Education. There was an immediate message. Ed Balls, his predecessor, had been the secretary of state for Children, Schools and Families. The change of name was not just to save on printer ink! It signalled a return to the core purpose of education.

When asked his three top priorities for the country on being elected prime minister in 1997, Tony Blair famously said "Education, Education, Education". It is generally agreed that, looking back over the past 13 years of Labour rule, their top 5 achievements have been:

1. The biggest ever investment in schools and hospitals and a massive expansion of higher education.
2. A national minimum wage
3. Before the recession, 2 million new jobs created during the longest, unbroken period of economic growth since the industrial revolution
4. Foreign policy before Iraq e.g. peace in Northern Ireland, freeing Kosovo
5. Embedding equity in law: civil partnerships and other reforms have created a more tolerant society for minorities and families and shown how government can drive social change.

Education certainly had a success story to tell over the Labour years.

- The biggest ever programme of building and renovating secondary schools was begun

coupled with year-on-year above inflation revenue funding increases for schools.

- Standards across all outcome measures and across all groups of learners have never been higher (although, as we are continually reminded, they have not risen as quickly as some of our competitor nations).
- The most comprehensive and all-encompassing inspection system led by Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, with recent inspections drawing on the school's own self-evaluation as a central part of the evidence.
- A quite amazing central database of individual student attainment and progress. Sadly, the interpretation of much of that data has been less than intelligent and has led to much unfair pressure on schools and their leaders.
- A huge expansion of the school workforce, with the best generation of teachers we have ever had and as many support staff, either helping students to learn or leaders to manage.
- A welcome move away from central-directed school improvement strategies towards school-to-school improvement. ASCL has long believed that schools working in collaboration was the best and most sustainable way of improving standards across the system.

But, sadly, despite all this progress, despite all this change, one was left with the feeling that they had not gone far enough quickly enough. Particularly in the final three Brown and Balls years, there remained a reluctance to trust the profession which had done so much to raise standards already. Government still tried to use centralist approaches to coerce change. The word "compliance" was on everyone's lips. What has compliance got to do with young people enjoying learning? There was still too much bureaucracy. When one has experienced the second most devolved education system in the world, one naturally finds bureaucracy irritating and wasteful. Millions of pounds were wasted in the planning stages of the Building Schools for the Future programme before even a brick was laid. School leaders spent hours and hours ensuring that their institutions complied with new safeguarding regulations.

The parliamentary select committee report sums it up very well, stating that "the government has continued to subject schools to a bewildering array of new initiatives and this has in many ways negated the good work started in the New Relationship with Schools."

The Coalition Agreement

After 5 days of three-way negotiations, Nick Clegg, the young leader of the Liberal democrat party did what he had always said he would do and joined his party into a full coalition with

David Cameron's Conservatives, the party who had won the most seats. This unlikely coalition has a working majority in parliament. Cabinet consists of 19 Conservatives and 5 LibDems, including Clegg as deputy prime minister. They were quick to announce the agreement on which the coalition would be based. It begins with a commitment to start to reduce the huge public sector deficit with public sector budgets having to be reduced by 25% over the next 4 years of this parliament. Here is the section on education:

"8. Education

Schools

We agree to promote the reform of schools in order to ensure:

- that new providers can enter the state school system in response to parental demand;
- that all schools have greater freedom over curriculum; and,
- that all schools are held properly accountable.

Higher education

We await Lord Browne's final report into higher education funding, and will judge its proposals against the need to:

- increase social mobility;
- take into account the impact on student debt;
- ensure a properly funded university sector;
- improve the quality of teaching;
- advance scholarship; and,
- attract a higher proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

If the response of the Government to Lord Browne's report is one that Liberal Democrats cannot accept, then arrangements will be made to enable Liberal Democrat MPs to abstain in any vote."

In addition, in the section dealing with the spending review there was a commitment to introduce a pupil premium, something that all parties had included in their manifestos as a strategy to close the gap in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and the rest. The fact that the pupil premium was to be funded with new money was a victory for the Lib Dems.

"We will fund a significant premium for disadvantaged pupils from outside the schools budget by reductions in spending elsewhere."

Returning to their old ways, the government announced the consultation about how to reshape school funding to incorporate the pupil premium earlier this week, when all schools had just

closed for the summer! The last Conservative government had annoyed teachers and leaders with a similar cavalier approach to the timing of consultations.

Immediate cuts

From day one of the new government, it was made clear that all public spending departments would have to reduce their budgets drastically. Although promising to maintain levels of funding at “the front line, in the classroom”, the secretary of state immediately announced that several quangos (quasi non-governmental bodies) were to be abolished:

- Becta – the organization that advised schools about the purchase and use of new technologies.
- General Teaching Council – the body that registers and regulates teachers
- Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency – which regulates all qualifications taken by students, is responsible for the national SATs tests in primary schools and which oversees the national curriculum.

All three of these organizations are now winding up their activities and, as yet, we have no idea how some of their key responsibilities are to be undertaken in the future. Probably they will be brought back into the Department for Education.

Then came one of the most contentious moves: Building Schools for the Future (BSF) had been a flagship Labour policy, aiming to rebuild or renovate every secondary school in the country over a 15-year programme. Some areas now have wonderful new school buildings but, because of the complexity of the bureaucracy at the planning stage, much of the country had yet to sign contracts with the builders. Support for all these programmes has been stopped whilst a review of capital spending strategy takes place. Until it reports next year, no further capital work may begin.

This caused uproar amongst many local authorities of all political parties, especially those who had already spent many months and millions of pounds on their BSF projects. A list was published showing those projects that would be stopped. It had mistakes in it. The secretary of state, Michael Gove, publicly apologized and re-issued the list. It was still not completely correct. Mr. Gove had to apologise again. This was repeated 5 times in 5 days until they finally produce an accurate list! More haste less speed.

Expanding the number of Academies

Meanwhile Mr Gove put those troubles behind him and put his crusading energies into his flagship policy which, he believes, will change the structure of England's schools. Under Labour, in an attempt to improve the education and life chances of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, often those living in inner cities, a new breed of independent state schools had been introduced. Academies, and their sponsors, are free from local authority control and funding directly by central government. They do not have to follow the national curriculum. They can set their own pay and conditions for staff. They can vary the length of the school day and year. Each with a new building, many have proved to be great innovators and are helping to regenerate inner city fortunes.

In a thinly-veiled attempt to do away with local authority control of schools, the government has announced that it intends to offer all state schools the chance to become academies, primary schools as well as secondary schools. A web-site was immediately opened where any school could express an interest in how to convert to academy status. Many did so only out of a professional interest, only to find their schools listed publicly, often to the annoyance of their local community.

However, Mr Gove pressed on, intent that his manifesto pledge to have some new academies by September should come to fruition. He announced that any school judged "outstanding" by Ofsted would be fast-tracked to academy status. This will completely change the nature of academy schools because the majority of schools with an outstanding rating are situated in the leafy, middle class suburbs.

Why might schools really want to become academies?

Greater autonomy is the reason most often quoted but, in reality, the most misleading. Local authorities in England no longer have control over schools. Successive reforms over the past twenty years have given schools much greater autonomy. Town halls no longer determine how schools spend their money nor how they are held accountable. Schools are held accountable but these constraints come from national government or national bodies, be it the national curriculum, national tests, Ofsted or government legislation on issue such as safeguarding.

The government has also promised to give all schools, not just academies, greater curriculum freedom and to end national arrangements for pay and conditions.

So why else would schools want to become academies?

There are three reasons:

- Status
- Money
- State of mind

The first of these – status – is problematic. Giving all “outstanding” schools a free pass to academy status is a clever move. It equates academies with quality. This is a key change: remember that until now academies have been the response to school failure, not to success. Since the new academies will already be successful schools, this will no longer be the characteristic of academies.

It is the second reason – money – that will drive most schools to become academies. As with grant maintained schools in the past, academy status brings a cash uplift of about 10%. This is the money otherwise held back by town halls for central education services. For a large secondary school, that could be £500,000 a year. Many heads believe that they can make better use of that money themselves, even though they may continue to purchase some services from the local authority. At a time of financial austerity the lure of extra cash is powerful.

So what about the notion that academy status is about “a state of mind”? In the early days of academies, under Tony Blair’s government, the new schools were strikingly different and innovative. It was not just the state-of-the-art buildings but the whole approach to teaching and learning that was new. However, more recent academies have been less innovative and there is no requirement for already “outstanding” schools to demonstrate innovation. In this respect, the academies programme is about to become less, not more, radical. Instead of being hothouses of experimentation, academies will become mainstream.

Free Schools

Another new type of school we can soon expect to see in England is the free school. The government’s enthusiasm for such schools stems from their visits abroad, in particular to Sweden and to New York. Free schools are all-ability state-funded schools set up in response to parental demand. Under the new plans it will be much easier for charities, universities, businesses, educational groups, teachers and groups of parents to get involved and start new schools. Ministers are working right across government to remove the red tape which can prevent new schools from setting up from planning laws to the department’s own school premises rules

For those interested in having a new school in their area, but without the time or experience to

set one up, there is advice available from the New Schools Network, an independent charity. The New Schools Network can also link them with more experienced groups and other parents to help make the new school a reality.

Many groups have already submitted outline plans.

But many people have severe reservations about this policy.

Firstly, the evidence from abroad has been used rather selectively. In Sweden, the majority of free schools have been set up by middle class parent groups, and some have indeed proved successful and shown great imagination in transforming old buildings into new learning spaces. However, the general feeling amongst Swedish headteachers that I have met is that they are spoiling what was a very successful national system of schooling. And they most certainly are doing very little to improve the learning of disadvantaged students.

However, in New York, there are indeed some marvellous examples of new Charter schools, set up and run by pioneering teachers and parents that really are making a difference to the lives and aspirations of inner city children. Attainment is quite outstanding as are progression rates on to university. But again, when I visited the States earlier this year, most people I met confirmed that these inner city Charter Schools, particularly in New York and New Orleans were the exception and that, across the country the evidence suggested that standards of attainment in Charter Schools was no higher, and often lower, than normal state schools.

Freedom, Fairness, Responsibility

As the new government led by David Cameron seeks to replace "big government" with "big society", its mantra is "freedom, fairness, responsibility". In education we have certainly seen the first of these aims put immediately into action by the Academies Bill. But many are worried that new freedoms will not always be applied fairly or responsibly. In ASCL we are happy to receive more freedom to run our schools and to decide what is best for our students but freedom for one school can result in difficulties for another down the road. Schools working together in partnerships, rather than competing with each other, has been one of the most pleasing developments of recent years. As I said earlier, it has also come to be accepted as the most effective and sustainable school improvement strategy. It would therefore be a great loss if greater individual freedom for schools, coming, as it does, at a time of shrinking resources causes school leaders to withdraw from partnership working.

Far greater freedom is also promised in the curriculum and the way it is assessed. Despite the fact that a major review of the curriculum has just been completed by the previous government, we are now to have another. It is likely to consist of a slimmer core and more attention to knowledge rather than skills, which to most of us seems to be a retrograde step. Here, we often hear government ministers quote the inspiration they have taken from the writings of E.D Hirsch (The Schools We Need and why we don't have them, Doubleday 1996).

The same, too, with examinations: this government does not believe it should have any involvement in the types of accreditation. Instead it has already said many more examinations which have previously not been funded (for example the IGCSE) are not permitted and, in future, independent examination boards will have sole control.

The Diploma, our newest form of learning, which was designed to combine the best elements of vocational and academic learning has been given very lukewarm support. Again following their freedom mantra, the government has lifted the entitlement of access to all diplomas for all learners, removed the additional support mechanisms, including vital additional funding and is leaving it to the market place to decide its future – a future that looks decidedly bleak as the courses are more expensive to run. But they include so much learning that is right for the 21st century. Students work together, they work on integrated projects, they learn how to learn and how to apply that learning. This is just what business and industry is crying out for which makes it all the more surprising that the Conservatives, who have always been the party of business, seem to wish to turn the clock back on learning and to give knowledge predominance over skills. There must be a central role for both!

Conclusion

I began with a thank you and I shall end with one. It is a real honour to have been invited to join your conference. In reality, one could already write a book about the amount of change taking place in public life in England, not just in education, but across all public services. With our first coalition government the politics is fascinating, too. Your English must be very good if you have followed all the detail of this talk but I am looking forward to answering your questions and to further discussion opportunities throughout the conference.

One can get carried away with educational and political change but it will always remain the job of education to keep their feet on the ground and to remember never to forget the needs of the children. And in today's young people lies all our futures which is why I am so optimistic about the future, whatever our political leaders might do to education. This is because I see today

young people right across the world believing in the power of learning.

Thank you again.