

Ministers Come, Ministers Go ...

NATE must continue its independent, principled critique of policy, Peter Thomas argues, whoever the latest appointment as Secretary of State for Education is.

Here's a tricky question: how do we respond to the news that we have a new Secretary of State (SoS) for Education? That has to be news that matters to us.

Well, first, it depends who 'we' and 'us' are. If it's we members of the general public, the response may, sadly, be *'What?'* If it's we who take a general interest in public affairs, the response may be *'Who?'* If it's we who have made education our daily care for many years, the response may be *'Go on – tell me which ambitious public-school bloke with no previous interest or experience in education is about to impose his prejudices upon teachers and learners?'*

Of course, each of these responses may be more informed and nuanced than my version of them. Perhaps. I do not want to begin on a negative note, but there have been 37 occupants of that role (under different titles) since 1945 – and 23 since I began teaching, 7 of the 23 were women, not that gender is politically significant when they included Margaret Thatcher and Gillian Shephard. One of the 23 had been a teacher (Estelle Morris). Three of the 23 had been educated in non-selective state schools (David Blunkett, Alan Johnson, Justine Greening.) So my expectations of the appointed heads of the service I have worked for all my life cannot be uninfluenced by a historical pattern.

The new Secretary of State

What of the latest? Might I reach for the reassurance of phrases like *'safe pair of hands'*, *'fresh pair of eyes'*, *'knows the territory'*, or *'intellectually gifted, principled and grounded in realism'*? I am willing to give any one or all of these a go. More than willing – desperate, more like.

Step forward Mr Gavin Williamson. Best-known facts – as freely offered by Mr Williamson himself: kept a tarantula in his office as Tory chief Whip and organised B. Johnson's Tory Leadership campaign. Not so freely offered: sacked as Minister of Defence for leaking information from a secret cabinet meeting. Recent involvement in education: promoted idea of army-based ethos schools for kids in deprived areas. First announcement as SoS: *'determined to drive up standards'*.

Oddly enough, it's the last of these that makes me most uneasy. It is, of course, possible that he has scrutinised the work of his recent predecessors (and of Mr N. Gibb) who have made the same claim, and judged them a failure, so leaving room for improvement. Perhaps. Or he may have just grasped the usual soundbite cliché. Either way, it would help to know what standards, and standards of what. We shall be told, no doubt. In the meantime, we await news of how the new minister intends to make his name. He has declared his priorities to be a nattily alliterative *'funding, further education and free schools'*. If funding means restoring 2010 per capita rates, raised to match increased population, and if FE gets a boost to do more than repeat English GCSE (or do it properly) I'm already with two-thirds of the priorities, though it's hard not to see 'free' schools as a diversion of resources from the main needs.

NATE's response

All of which takes me back to the tricky question at the start. How do we, as NATE, respond to an incoming SoS? Do we bid welcome and offer to make our resources, experience, research and consultancy available? That may mean having the offer spurned – as when NATE was regarded by Mr Gove and advisor D. Cummings as part of 'the Blob'. Or do we submit a detailed and measured response, as with our OFSTED consultation, and then receive no evidence that it was taken into account, or even acknowledged? There should, surely, be channels of communication between government and professional associations, but they seem to have silted up – or we would not now be looking at a drop in A Level English take-up that we would have predicted following the latest GCSE upheaval. There are channels, of course: the DfE has set up advisory groups on curriculum, recruitment and retention and initial training but, as Warwick Mansell has demonstrated in his *Education Uncovered* blog, the invited members tend to represent organisations and opinions favoured by Government, often people with a stake in privatised training or academy chains.

NATE's mission

Here's the problem: NATE has, since the 1960s, been an association whose loyalty has been to the development of English teaching for the benefit of teachers, students and the subject itself. It has pursued this mission with rigorous independence, unfunded by Government or by agencies influencing its agenda. That mission must be sustained, and that independence preserved, so that NATE's position is rooted in the principles, values and research that make English a humane discipline. This means making the humane as important as the discipline: it means valuing and using students' own cultural capital and equipping them with knowledge and skills for life as well as for passing exams. NATE believes that English is varied, subtle and complex – and that learners, and learning itself, are varied, subtle and complex. That is why NATE takes a non-partisan, sceptical view of debates limited by false binaries of trad/prog or DI/group-work. The recent member survey shows that what English teachers want most from NATE is quality resources and ideas for classroom use. NATE must keep this focus, but must also represent the wider-reaching and longer-lasting vision of the subject in its events and publications.

This means NATE will continue its independent, non-partisan critique of educational policy and practice. It will also seek to contribute to Government policy, whether invited or not. For the moment, a gesture of specialist availability can be genuinely made, by writing to the new SoS with an outline of what NATE does, and how it may be of service. Our recent response to OFSTED and our survey, as well as our response to the current AL situation, should be enough to test the water in the Association/Government channel of communication. A new SoS has the option of doing some dredging to clear the channel.

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