

## The politics of education revisited: Anthony Crosland and Michael Gove in historical perspective

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This article traces continuity and change in the governance of British education through the comparison of two ministers, Anthony Crosland and Michael Gove. Taking Maurice Kogan's seminal *The Politics of Education* as the point of departure, the article highlights the role of political ideology in large-scale educational change, taking school reorganization as a case study. The article argues that the recent tenure of Michael Gove indicates that large-scale change within the British education system still requires a (more or less) coherent ideological framework and considerable commitment on the part of the individual minister.

**Keywords:** education governance; Michael Gove; Anthony Crosland; Department for Education; education policy

### Introduction

In September 1970, recently out of office, Anthony Crosland met with his former civil servant Maurice Kogan to be interviewed for his book *The Politics of Education* (Kogan *et al.*, 1971). Kogan's ambition in *The Politics of Education* was to examine the governance and direction of education policy at an elite level. In part, this opportunity presented itself simply due to historical circumstance – both Crosland and Kogan's other interviewee, Sir Edward Boyle (a Conservative predecessor of Crosland's), not to mention Kogan himself, were no longer in government. Crosland for his part was now a member of the Labour Shadow Cabinet, continuing his political career, while Boyle was retired from politics, installed as the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leeds (Kogan *et al.*, 1971: 7).

But there was more to it than that. Crosland had not finished his tenure in the Wilson government<sup>1</sup> at the Department for Education and Science; he had been translated first to the Board of Trade and subsequently to Local Government and Regional Planning (Wilson, 1971: 100, 544, 894). However, it was his tenure as Secretary of State for Education and Science between January 1965 and August 1967 that had the greatest impact, both on the direction of the Wilson government and on the education sector as a whole in England and Wales. Between 1965 and 1967 it was no exaggeration to state that Crosland had rewritten the secondary education settlement, tearing up the tripartite system that had followed from the Butler Act and installing in its place a system of comprehensive education (Dean, 1998; Kogan *et al.*, 1971; Kogan, 2006). In addition, he had introduced the 'binary' system of higher education, through the designation of the polytechnics as alternative providers of degree-level education to the universities (Kogan, 1971: 52).

There are few education ministers in the post-war period who stand serious comparison with Crosland, either in terms of their investment in the subject or in their impact as ministers

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(Finn, 2015b: 3–4; Simons, 2015: 117–18). It is the purpose of this article to assess Michael Gove's recent tenure as Secretary of State alongside Crosland's as an historical comparator. There are several factors which connect Gove and Crosland, and render them comparable, in a manner dissimilar to other post-war education ministers. Firstly, both were (in very different ways) ideologues, seeking to use education as one facet of a broader political agenda. Secondly, both delivered this ideological vision in concrete terms through the most dramatic means possible – large-scale school reorganization. Even Kenneth Baker's reforms in the 1980s (including the introduction of the National Curriculum) did not measure up to the scale of change instigated by these two ministers in the structure of the school system. Finally, the Gove reforms to the school system connected him directly to Crosland; it was, in significant part, the Crosland legacy that Gove sought to undermine if not eradicate. As I have written elsewhere:

Most fundamentally, it was the impact both Crosland and Gove had on the education system which presents an obvious comparison; put simply, after Crosland, the tide was set (seemingly irrevocably) in favour of comprehensives. After Gove, the course was changed (also apparently irrevocably) in favour of academies.

(Finn, 2015b: 4)

The purpose of this article is to draw insights as to the nature of the governance of education in Britain generally, and England more specifically, in the post-war period. In order to do this the article seeks to revisit Kogan's priorities in *The Politics of Education* and address 'the changing role of the department' and its ministers (Kogan *et al.*, 1971: 25) through the comparison of the two ministers' times in office. They have claims to be considered both comparable and representative of two distinctive traditions. Both Crosland and Gove were avowed intellectuals, products of Oxford, and committed educationalists (though Crosland himself denied this, characterizing himself as an 'educational politician') (Kogan *et al.*, 1971: 173). Yet Crosland was a definitive figure in the revisionist Labour tradition,<sup>2</sup> whereas Gove was and remains a 'restorationist' Conservative (Finn, 2015b: 6–9). Both were ideological – and, to differing extents, polarizing – figures. Using these two ministers as case studies, and focusing on one issue that connected them both (namely school reorganization), this article seeks to sketch how their periods in office reflect continuity and change in the governance of education in modern Britain. The discussion begins with a comparison of their political ideologies before turning to discussion of their respective impacts on school organization.

## **Ideology**

### **a) Anthony Crosland's revisionist socialism**

Crosland became Secretary of State for Education and Science in January 1965 as a result of exceptional circumstances (Crosland, 1982: 140–1), but he was already a committed educationalist, however much he himself proclaimed his amateurism. Education was an integral part of his broader social and political thought; Crosland was, in Michael Young's phrase, 'the greatest socialist revisionist of his time' (Young, 1998: 49). This reputation was founded on his book, *The Future of Socialism*, published while Labour was in opposition in 1956 (Crosland, 1964).<sup>3</sup> It amounted to a 'fundamental redefinition' of the Labour project (Harris, 2000: 33). Labour had lost two consecutive general elections, in 1951 and 1955; there was a real urgency in the party to answer the question of why, and provide a response that would chart a return to power. This is well-evidenced by the almost neurotic level of internal Labour Party analysis of changes in the social structure that took place during the 1950s and 1960s (Drain, 1962). For Crosland, the implications of Labour in opposition were more profound than for some of his colleagues;

he lost his seat in 1955 and was exiled to a period outside Parliament (Kogan *et al.*, 1971: 14). This gave him time to write *The Future of Socialism*, the central contention of which was that as capitalism had evolved, so too must socialism, which could not afford to be dogmatic and which needed to be clear in its values in order to adapt to the contemporary situation (Crosland, 1964; Reisman, 1997).

This revisionism saw Crosland become an appealing figure to later Labour modernizers such as Gordon Brown (with Brown writing the foreword to the fiftieth anniversary edition) (Brown, 2006). Yet the contribution of Crosland's book was particularly profound in terms of his educational thinking, and of his relation of the place of education to the objectives of his revised socialism. For Crosland, the original (British) socialist objectives of control of the means of production, the empowerment of the unions (which was a necessary consequence), and a fundamental 'transfer of economic power' had largely been achieved by the post-war Attlee government (Crosland, 1964: 1–22). Socialism now had to be about more than narrowly economic prescriptions (and certainly more than a simple reversion to nationalization), and in this new pantheon of aspirations education played a key role (Reisman, 1997: 65–90). Crosland argued that 'most liberal people would now allow that every child has a natural "right" as citizen, not merely to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"', but to attain 'that position in the social scale to which his native talents entitle him' (Crosland, 1964: 140). He was deeply critical of the extent to which this was frustrated within the British class system by the entrenched role of public schools:

... all children can, if the society so decides, at least be given an equal chance of access to the best education. This chance does not exist in Britain, since the wealthier classes can purchase for their children the overwhelming social privilege denied to other children equally deserving but less fortunate than their parents, of a public school education ... Here it need only be said that the best public schools offer not only a superior education, but the further crucial advantages of the right accent, manners and dependability of character: that these advantages are a major determinant of occupation, and hence of income, power and prestige; and that their distribution is correlated almost exclusively with parents' wealth and class location, and only very indirectly with innate talent or performance. This seems to me, although I have personally benefited from it, an indefensible injustice, offending blatantly against the principle of equal opportunity.

(Crosland, 1964: 140)

At the time Crosland was writing the tripartite system of education, where children were 'sorted' into different schools – notionally grammar schools, secondary moderns, and technical schools, though there were few of the latter (Sanderson, 1994) – was under fierce attack. The ascendancy of psychology in educational research, which had characterized the pre-war Board of Education's engagement with the academy, had been shattered by criticism from sociologists and others who denied the validity of the 11+ (Wooldridge, 1996: 246–7; Dean, 1998: 66–7; Simon, 1985: 289; Simon, 1991). In Roy Lowe's words, the credibility of the test was a 'key issue' in the course of the 1950s (Lowe, 1988: 129). Crosland himself put it succinctly: 'the whole business has a distinctly arbitrary air' (Crosland, 1964: 197).

Crosland added to this the issue of wealth; inequality of wealth – notwithstanding significant increases in working-class purchasing power – remained profound, and had to be addressed (Crosland, 1964: 140–1). Taken together, these reflections anticipated the devastating criticism of 'meritocracy' as an idea, which Michael Young developed in his *Rise of the Meritocracy* in 1958 (Young, 1958).

Yet Crosland was less circumspect than Young in placing education at the heart of the socialist ideal, and the state education system in particular as a mechanism for the promotion of equality – the realization of which remained central to Crosland's revisionist socialist agenda.

Young for his part later served as an adviser to Crosland during his time in office, and was unable to convince him to move against public schools before reforming the state sector (Young, 1998: 52–3). The headmaster of Westminster School in the 1970s (then an assistant master at Harrow) wrote later that Crosland sought not to abolish the public schools but, through the device of the Public Schools Commission, to ‘offer’ them ‘a role’ (Rae, 1981: 38). This was inimical to Young’s views on school organization.

Crosland was temperamentally a ‘moderate’ (Rae, 1981: 38) and questioned himself on how much equality was desirable; he answered simply that ‘we need, I believe, more equality than we now have’ (Crosland, 1964: 148). This would necessitate ‘larger egalitarian changes in our educational system, the distribution of property, the distribution of resources in periods of need, social manners and style of life ...’ to name but a few areas that would be part of Crosland’s ‘social revolution’ (Crosland, 1964: 148). The ‘large scale’ educational change Crosland conceived of was the promotion of comprehensive education as the norm in secondary schools. He rejected the Victorian and Edwardian ethos of ‘education for leadership’ (McCulloch, 1991):

No doubt Plato and Arnold were all very well in their day; but it would be distinctly odd if educational systems adapted in the one case to an idealised oligarchy of philosopher-kings, and in the other to the needs of a far-flung British Empire, were equally well adapted to a democratic egalitarian, mid-twentieth-century society.

(Crosland, 1964: 199)

Crosland’s essential belief in comprehensive education stemmed from the desire to:

avoid the extreme social division caused by physical segregation into schools of widely divergent status, and the extreme social resentment caused by failure to win a grammar ... school place, when this is thought to be the only avenue to a ‘middle-class’ occupation.

(Crosland, 1964: 202)

Later, when in office, he would argue that:

Decisions about education – about priorities in spending or the organisation of the school system – must have a social dimension, and reflect value judgements about justice, class, equality, ethics or economic growth. It is against this background that we must see the movement towards comprehensive education. For I believe this represents a strong and irresistible pressure in British society to extend the rights of citizenship.

(Crosland, 1966: 1)

Comprehensive education, within Crosland’s socialist framework, was thus in part intended to foster social cohesion in addition to promoting equality of opportunity. This issue of social cleavage was the most pronounced feature of Crosland’s educational thought prior to his taking office, and explained his dual focus on state school reorganization and the place of public schools. In relation to the latter, Crosland sought a ‘gradual integration of these schools into the State system of education’ and by his own admission this was ‘no more than a reversion to the proposals of the Fleming Committee’ (Crosland, 1964: 193). Those proposals were ‘that leading independent boarding schools should place one-quarter of their places in a new publicly funded national bursary scheme’ (Hillman, 2012: 236). Gradualism was the hallmark of the Crosland approach to the public schools, which reflected both his own belief in their quality – ‘their staffing ration is higher, the academic quality (and often the devotion to teaching) of the staff superior’ – and the scale of the political challenge involved (Crosland, 1964: 191). As he put it, banning private schools was ‘not the right solution. It is out of tune with the temper of the country, and is therefore not likely in any event to be politically practicable’ (Crosland, 1964: 192).

Maurice Kogan wrote in 2006 that ‘no other minister within living memory put in that level of work’ in terms of Crosland’s pre-appointment thinking and theorizing on the place of

education within a broader political agenda (Kogan, 2006: 72). The pursuit of increased equality, the central objective of Crosland's socialism, required in his view these particular educational interventions (Reisman, 1997); education was not an end in itself, but was a mechanism for the promotion of a society organized along socialist lines (as Crosland envisaged them). This would, ostensibly, be a major point of fracture between Crosland and Conservative opponents, both in his own time and beyond.

### **b) Michael Gove's restorationist conservatism**

Michael Gove paralleled Crosland in that he too had given significant thought to educational issues prior to taking office. He differed from Crosland insofar as this was formally his brief; Gove, elected to Parliament in 2005 for Surrey Heath, had been education shadow for almost three years before the 2010 general election (then Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families). On the formation of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government, Gove became Secretary of State for the new Department for Education, by which point he had honed the key themes of his educational thought (Finn, 2015b).

His pre-parliamentary career had been in journalism, and through this – specifically his opinion pieces for *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* – it is possible to trace the contours of his conservatism (Finn, 2015b). Gove was a Thatcherite in two senses: he was both a modernizer, keenly attuned to the nuances of neo-liberal political economy and the spectre of globalization, and a restorationist, who sought to restore an imagined utopia through the machinery of government direction. Crosland's contention – that conservatives did not in fact seek to restore the past, but instead to preserve the '*status quo*' (Crosland, 1964: 27) – did not hold water after Thatcher and certainly did not apply to Gove. This was reflected in a key concern of Gove's social and political thought, namely the question of identity. Gove, both as a journalist and a politician, was exercised by the issue of national identity. His book *Celsius 7/7* was a polemic against what Gove saw as creeping Islamic fundamentalism in the West (and in Britain in particular), which in his view had been aided and abetted by liberals who had refused to confront 'Islamism' head-on (Gove, 2007). Comparing the quality of *The Future of Socialism*, a deeply analytical tract based on a deep understanding of several disciplines including economics, to *Celsius 7/7* is almost unfair on Gove, not least because the ambitions of *Celsius 7/7* were considerably more limited. Gove – as a true conservative – also did not see himself as a theoretician and would not envisage for himself the role of social scientific guru that Crosland naturally adopted. But the point of the comparison is not to contrast quality or depth, but merely to note that both men evinced essential aspects of their educational thought through books intended to popularize their ideas.

The most substantive statement of Gove's thinking on education prior to his appointment in office was his much-vaunted speech to the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) in June 2009 (Gove, 2009; Simons, 2015: 118–19). He began by attacking the Brown government's 2007 redistribution of Cabinet responsibilities in education, arguing that the creation of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) 'reflected a philosophical shift in how government sees its role' (Gove, 2009). This 'shift' ensured that 'schools ... lost their principle [sic] purpose – and been saddled with a host of supplementary roles' (Gove, 2009). The implication was clear: that a soulless, Fabian socialism had viewed education simply as a means to various ends. Gove's agenda (so he claimed) was different:

Education has an emancipatory, liberating, value. I regard education as the means by which individuals can gain access to all the other goods we value – cultural, social and economic – on their terms. I believe education allows individuals to become authors of their own life story.

(Gove, 2009)

In this, Gove echoed Crosland's rhetoric on the link between education and citizenship. But his justifications were dissimilar; whereas Crosland was keen to distance his personal experience of education from his political priorities, Gove invoked it:

I know from my own experience that the opportunities I have enjoyed are entirely the consequence of the education I have been given. Perhaps I value education so much because it has given me so much – but what it has given me most is the chance to shape my own destiny. For generations of my family before me, life was a matter of dealing with the choices others made, living by a pattern others set. I, and those members of my generation who were given the gift of knowledge by wonderful teachers, have been given the precious freedom to follow their own path.

(Gove, 2009)

His own education was to the fore in how he conceived of the role of education policy, as Tim Hands has noted:

Michael Gove shaped a nation's educational future less by understanding its present than by contemplating his own past: his vision was exclusively bound up in his reverence for his own education. Robert Gordon's College provided an early role model of respect for authority ... An Oxford undergraduate degree in English represented an equally distinctive legacy ... it would have been difficult for any student of Michael Gove's period to have left Oxford with any literary canon to the right of them ...

(Hands, 2015: 35–6)

Gove claimed to be in support of the 'Scottish Enlightenment principle of the democratic intellect', again drawing on his own Scottish heritage, and further adduced E.D. Hirsch (a ubiquitous presence in his educational thought) on cultural literacy (Gove, 2009). Gove was unambiguous in stating that his educational thinking was oriented towards 'traditional' education, and against what he saw as the faddism promoted by self-interested educational bureaucrats (Gove, 2009). In this lay the seed of his later, much-publicized, 'full-scale war' with the 'blob' (Finn, 2015b: 5).

In sharp contrast to Crosland, and in line with Thatcherite (and neo-liberal) political economy, Gove laid emphasis on 'autonomy' (Smithers, 2015: 261–6). In the RSA speech, this manifested itself in a commitment to promote an extension of Labour's academies, state secondary schools that were free from local authority control and often sponsored by business. Initially, such academies had been envisaged as means of rescuing failing schools, and they built on the inheritance of the City Technology Colleges (CTCs), which had been devised by Kenneth Baker in 1986 and subsequently provided for in legislation through the 1988 Education Reform Act (Gove, 2009; Fisher, 2008; Walford, 2000). As Gove put it:

Many of those schools which have been most successful in attracting new talent and in helping raise the prestige of teaching have been those schools – whether old CTCs or new academies – that have flourished outside both local and central bureaucratic control.

(Gove, 2009)

Gove spoke of 'extending ... academy freedoms' to a whole range of institutions, and mentioned the idea that would in time become free schools (Gove, 2009). Freeing schools from 'bureaucratic control', as Gove labelled it, ensured that they would:

... pursue an approach towards education which rests on traditional subject disciplines, rigour, an expectation that every child, whatever their background, can follow a basic academic curriculum and a belief that a college education is the destiny of the overwhelming majority.

(Gove, 2009)

Although there was an obligatory genuflection towards his party leader's 'big society' agenda, this was very much Gove's personal manifesto – which in large part became the education section of his party's manifesto. Although Gove disdained theory and claimed in the RSA speech

to see education in terms of its own merits, in reality his approach to education betrayed an instrumentalism that was anchored in his restorationist conservatism; whereas Crosland sought a role for education in the promotion of equality as he defined it, Gove sought a role for education in the development of a shared identity and – in a point of rhetorical confluence with Crosland – in order to foster personal liberation (Gove, 2009).

## **Crosland and Gove as ministers**

### **a) Styles**

Crosland and Gove were self-consciously intellectuals; in this they were pledged members of a club that numbers few in politics. As Crosland acknowledged, this was true even in the 1960s, especially among ministers, not least due to the pressure of time (Kogan *et al.*, 1971: 157). Both believed in the value of academic education (in the traditional sense of that phrase), although they had vastly different views of its *relative* value to other forms of education. They believed in the power of ideas to convince audiences and, once themselves convinced of a position, set themselves to the task of persuading others.

However there was also a sharp divergence that may well stem from their own educational backgrounds. Crosland was a trained economist, having switched to the Philosophy, Politics and Economics honours school at Oxford; he had been a don at Trinity College during the post-war years (Jefferys, 1999; Kogan, 2006: 72). Gove was an English literature graduate (Hands, 2015). This is reflected in their arguments; Gove was fond of allusion and rhetorical flourish whereas Crosland built his arguments slowly, starting from first principles and testing hypotheses (or at least appearing to – Maurice Kogan (2006: 75) offers legitimate criticisms of his selectivity of evidence) before coming to conclusions. At a superficial level, Gove's analyses can appear impressionistic and subjective, while Crosland's appear empirical and rigorous. But this is superficial. Crosland picked and chose his case studies to make his argument stronger; Gove did adduce quantitative data. Nonetheless, Gove was often accused of mishandling such data – notably in some apparently poorly sourced claims about the history curriculum (Brown, 2013) and in his use of a flawed set of PISA statistics.

Both ministers were idiosyncratic characters, and in both cases at least to some extent self-consciously so. Crosland was a solidly middle-class public schoolboy and Oxonian whose father had been a senior civil servant (who had declined a knighthood) (Kogan, 2006: 74). However, unlike some, Crosland genuinely disdained his upbringing and social position; this was in sharp contrast to Roy Jenkins, who sought out the trappings of the British establishment with gusto, ultimately securing for himself the Chancellorship of Oxford University (Jenkins had also become Chancellor of the Exchequer before his old friend Crosland, an ambition both had shared, though it is questionable to what extent Jenkins found this more satisfactory than the highest honorary office at his *alma mater*) (Marquand, 2014). However sincere Crosland's disdain for the trappings of the English middle and upper classes, his keenness to show it (and his earnestness for engaging with his working-class constituents) was often regarded with a degree of scepticism by his contemporaries and added to the image of an eccentric (Crosland, 1982: 153–4).

Gove for his part had attended public school for a period of his educational career before proceeding to Oxford, but originated from considerably more humble circumstances than Crosland. Though often sneered at by his critics, this in part explains his genuine investment in the idea of social mobility; it may be, as Hands argues, that this was primarily down to his

personal prejudices (Hands, 2015), but this does not make his sincerity any less real (even if it was discomfiting for those on the left who found themselves repeatedly accused of failure – Shirley Williams being a favourite target of Gove's) (Finn, 2015b: 8). Gove was waspish and aggressive, though less so than some of his advisers. The audience mattered hugely for both men, who were inveterate performers. A key point to bear in mind (despite the retrospective canonization of Crosland) was that they were both self-consciously insurgents; Crosland's revisionism put him at odds with much of his party (notably the Bevanite left) (Crosland, 1982: 70) while Gove's fondness for appropriating left-wing language was only possible because his right-wing Thatcherite credentials were impeccable (Simons, 2015).

As ministers, Crosland and Gove favoured their own cabals, surrounding themselves with advisers drawn from outside the department. In Crosland's case, this was more or less radical; 1960s Whitehall was yet to undergo the 'special adviser' revolution of subsequent decades. Indeed, Crosland's advisers tended to be academics (such as A.H. Halsey and John Vaizey), public intellectuals (such as Michael Young), and stakeholders (including prominent headteachers) with whom he held 'seminars' at his home (Kogan *et al.*, 1971: 185). By Gove's time, Whitehall had evolved and he was no different than his immediate Labour predecessors in recruiting special advisers who were loyal to him personally (and who would be just as summarily dismissed on the arrival of his successor, Nicky Morgan) (Smithers, 2015: 289). In terms of influences on Gove from outside the department, there were close links with the think tank Policy Exchange, as Jonathan Simons, Head of Education at Policy Exchange, has noted (Simons, 2015: 118). Additionally, the New Schools Network, an NGO established to support the foundation of 'free schools', was initially headed by Gove's former researcher Rachel Wolf, before she was succeeded by former Policy Exchange (and Conservative Research Department) Deputy Director Natalie Evans (now Baroness Evans) (Simons, 2015: 119).

A striking difference between the 'coteries' surrounding Crosland and Gove, however, was the level of dissension. Crosland, as is widely attested, sought vigorous intellectual debate and even confrontation (Young, 1998). He had extremely high expectations of his civil servants and also those he invited to his 'seminars'. This was often too much for his civil servants; Vaizey remarked in a letter to Crosland in the early 1970s that Kogan, a senior administrator at the Department through most of the 1960s, was 'terrified' of him (Vaizey, 1971). The *quid pro quo* was that Crosland expected to be challenged, and though the members of his 'seminars' were broadly sympathetic to him (as were, increasingly, his civil servants) they differed from him on significant issues. Gove's advisers by contrast were true believers, in particular Dominic Cummings who became infamous on his resignation in January 2014 (Smithers, 2015: 288). In Alan Smithers's view, Cummings was 'the most influential adviser on schools in fifty years ... [but] verbally ferocious' (Smithers, 2015: 288). Cummings was trenchant in his criticism of anyone, within or without government, who dared assail the Gove revolution. Even before his departure from office, a 250-page document outlining his views had found its way into the hands of *The Guardian*, which published it on 11 October 2013 (Cummings, 2013). Entitled *Some Thoughts on Education and Political Priorities*, it made headlines for its reflections on genetics and IQ, which for many educationalists harked back to the pre-Crosland era of Cyril Burt and the 11+ (Helm, 2013).

Both Crosland and Gove built alliances outside the department but in very different ways. Crosland sought to work with the stakeholders who were there, notably the local authorities and the unions, but also educationalists. It is not overplaying it to state that Gove's objective was to destroy or at least severely damage many of the stakeholders in the educational landscape he inherited, and in this he was at least in part successful.



### **b) Achievements: School reorganization**

A clear point of comparability is the scale and quantity of the two ministers' policy successes (for reasons of space, it is only possible to go into detail on the *most* comparable – school reorganization). To begin with Crosland, his period at the department was marked chiefly by the issuance of Circular 10/65, which 'requested' schemes for the organization of schooling along comprehensive lines (DES, 1965) and the development of the polytechnics as an alternative sector of higher education to the universities from 1966 onwards (DES, 1966). Crosland was a key promoter of the idea of comprehensive education and a force in its adoption as Labour Party policy (though he had not originated the idea himself). The 1964 Labour manifesto had committed the party to reorganizing 'secondary education ... on comprehensive lines' (Labour Party, 1964). Yet the feasibility of this, and how quickly it might be done, was open to question; education remained a 'national service locally administered', and it would be necessary to cajole or coerce local authorities in order to introduce a genuinely national system of comprehensive education. As Dennis Dean has shown, part of the groundwork was laid for Crosland by his immediate predecessor, Michael Stewart, who effectively bought off the local authorities (at least in part) by rejecting the Robbins Report's proposal to take teacher-training colleges out of local authority control (Dean, 1998: 69).

It was clear that Labour would work with, rather than against, the local authorities. Legislation was hardly desirable given the government's slender majority; Stewart was overruled by Cabinet when he sought to retain the threat of legislation (Dean, 1998: 75). In one of his last acts as Secretary of State, Stewart drew the sting of the Conservative opposition to comprehensive reorganization by in large part defeating an opposition motion on the subject (Dean, 1998: 75). It was, Harold Wilson later remarked, 'a triumph such as few enjoy in a lifetime in Parliament' (Wilson, 1971: 100). Crosland built on this by an extensive series of consultations with various stakeholders, including representatives of local authorities, unions, educationalists, and even campaign groups in defence of the grammar school (Dean, 1998: 80). Even so, as he later reflected to Kogan, he did not feel himself at all without power over the local authorities:

I was very struck by how much influence, control, power, or whatever the right word is, the Department has ... a Minister can have a huge influence on the system.

(Kogan *et al.*, 1971: 169)

Circular 10/65, the document that finally outlined the government's priority for comprehensive reorganization, appeared in July 1965 (Kogan *et al.*, 1971: 189). Famously, Crosland opted for 'request' over 'require' in its injunction to action (Jefferys, 1999: 103), but finally a deadline – one year from the date of the circular – had been set for local authorities to submit proposals. By the year's end, Stuart Maclure, the future editor of the *Times Educational Supplement*, adjudicated that it had been a 'points win for Crosland', with 40 of the 165 local education authorities having submitted plans (Maclure, 1966). Colin Chapman, writing in the *Sunday Times*, noted the 'big majority for comprehensives', with 'all but a few local education authorities ... accept[ing] the government's policy on comprehensive secondary education' (Chapman, 1966).

Crosland had been keen to avoid legislation (though his wife noted that he 'contemplated' it during a period of resistance following the circular) (Crosland, 1982: 144), dating back to his days as the author of *The Future of Socialism* (Crosland, 1964: 204–7). This wariness of the ultimate power available to government alienated, or at least antagonized, some advocates of comprehensive reorganization. Brian Simon noted in the early 1990s (with some bitterness) that the cautious approach of the government had ensured 'that we still do not have universal comprehensive education in England a generation (27 years) later' (Simon, 1992: 360), though Simon blamed Dick Crossman rather than Crosland. As Chitty puts it, 'the Circular was to prove

unpopular with both the champions and the opponents of comprehensive reform' (Chitty, 2014: 30), because:

proponents of comprehensive reform would certainly have welcomed something more dirigiste, particularly after the March 1966 General Election, which gave the Labour Party a Commons majority over the other parties of nearly 100, with the clear prospect of a full five-year term ahead.

(Chitty, 2014: 31)

By contrast, Gove was content to use the *fiat* of parliamentary sovereignty to its fullest extent in order to pursue his own plans for school reorganization. As Simons notes, beyond the schema outlined in the RSA speech of June 2009, 'a private draft of what would become the Academies Act [was] sitting in a safe, having been reviewed and vetted by lawyers' (Simons, 2015: 118). Gove had translated his ideas on education into concrete policies that in turn formed the education section of the Conservative manifesto (Conservative Party, 2010: 51–3). Gove's proposals for school reorganization went far beyond Crosland's and did not demonstrate the willingness to compromise that Crosland occasionally evidenced (Crosland had never believed that England and Wales would 'go' fully comprehensive), partly because he fundamentally disavowed the role of the local authorities (which Crosland did not call into question). Gove saw local authorities as one element of the 'blob', which he ferociously attacked in an infamous *Daily Mail* article in 2013. Simons notes that he took aim at:

the efforts of those anti-reformers, named as 'the ultra-militants in the unions', 'all academics who have helped run the university departments of education responsible for developing curricula and teacher training courses' and various other 'educational gurus in and around our universities' with allies in 'local government ... and the quangos and committees which shaped policy'.

(Simons, 2015: 123)

Local authorities, as Gove knew only too well, were (particularly in inner cities) all too often run by Labour, who would be inimically opposed to the reforms he had in mind. He decided (before entering office) not to tolerate the 'slower' pace that Crosland had been prepared to accept as the price of compromise and conciliation, but instead opted to legislate immediately. The Academies Act made provision for the extension of the academy scheme in line with the proposals Gove had outlined in his RSA speech, and also facilitated the creation of 'free schools', schools that could be set up (with central government support) independently of local government (Hands, 2015: 37–8).

Such an approach would have foundered in the Crosland era, but it is worth noting the historical changes between the two periods, encapsulated in the impact of Gove's heroine, Margaret Thatcher. Thatcherism had weakened the unions, and through the 1988 Education Reform Act also weakened the power of local authorities, specifically within education. Her enunciation of neo-liberal political economy (Green, 1999) changed the political landscape and in turn reformed the Labour Party, allowing Tony Blair and Andrew Adonis (ostensibly obsessed with 'education, education, education') to develop further policies championing autonomy (notably the original academies policy) in office (Adonis, 2012). Gove was able therefore to cast himself (in a phrase once used by David Cameron) as the 'heir to Blair' (rather than Thatcher); as Simons notes, Gove referred to Blair as 'the master' (Simons, 2015: 119). The brute force approach that Gove pursued relied in part on the relative weakness of his opposition (when contrasted with Crosland's time) and was motivated by the desire for urgent change (whereas Crosland was prepared to tolerate, to paraphrase Maclure, a 'points win', rather than a knockout). In terms of pace he was undeniably successful. By 2014, over half of secondary schools in England were academies; free schools were slower to come into being (not least because they were often

begun from scratch), but 251 of them were nonetheless open by 2014 (Lightman, 2015: 16–17). Chitty describes Gove's legacy in school structure as nothing less than a 'schools revolution' (Chitty, 2014: 94).

The speed was partly due to the legislative nature of the programme and the attendant power that ceded to the department (statutory power such as Crosland could only have wished for), and, in Lightman's view, the prevailing policy climate of austerity. Austerity, and in particular cuts to local government budgets, were a stick to beat comprehensives down the path to academization, even when the schools themselves and their leaderships had no real appetite for the change; put simply, 'many schools saw conversion as a protection against budget restrictions' (Lightman, 2015: 16). Thus Gove benefited from the broader political economy prevailing at the time, whereas Crosland was compelled to negotiate more complicated political terrain, both in terms of the stakeholders involved in the sector and the policy framework of his government.

The Gove legacy in school reorganization was to fundamentally diminish the role of local authorities, which Lightman described as 'skeletal' in some areas by 2014 (Lightman, 2015: 17). It was not a policy pursued 'on its own', but in line with Gove's own elucidation of a Thatcherite/Blairite/neo-liberal political economy that valued autonomy and accountability for their own sake, treating these aspects as normative values for the delivery of services. The catch was in the accountability – though nominally the schools were 'freed' (in rhetorical terms) from much of the supervision of local authorities, in practice they were now subordinated to an even more incisive climate of target- and goal-setting than had been present under Labour (which was in sharp contrast to what Gove had claimed would be the case in his 2009 RSA speech) (Waters, 2015). Whether it was the introduction of the 'EBacc' (Lightman, 2015: 18–19), or the existential accountability imposed by Gove's consistent referencing of PISA statistics, schools felt (not unreasonably) under significant pressure. This both reflected the 'governmentality' of neo-liberalism, which had taken firm root firstly under Thatcher and then under Blair (Harvey, 2005: 22–3), but also the personal investment of Gove, who saw himself as the nation's schoolmaster-in-chief. Whereas Crosland had claimed that as an 'educational politician' he lacked the expertise to meddle in pedagogy or curricula, Gove felt powerfully that this was his purview; one leading sociologist condemned his curriculum as 'a curriculum of compliance' (Young, 2011: 267). One fundamental divergence in the two ministers' promotion of school reorganization lay in the respective level of humility evinced by each; the Gove style, according to Louis Coiffait, was hardly humble:

Despite years of preparation he and his team did not demonstrate sufficient understanding of the people in the education system, put little or no effort in to consulting, made weak or selective use of evidence and increasingly had to rely on top-down force, sometimes appearing to resort to unsavoury and personal tactics.

(Coiffait, 2015: 144)

Crosland left the department in August 1967 for the Board of Trade, with some reluctance (Finn, 2015b: 3). However, between the promulgation of the Circular and the end of his tenure he was an able propagandist for comprehensive education and was keen to secure allies for it wherever he could find them. As Simons notes, trade union conferences are never the easiest audiences for ministers to address, Conservative or Labour. Crosland handled them well, not least as there was a clear sense among the union leaderships that Crosland was prepared to act as the service's representative in office, notwithstanding his (to them suspect) revisionist views; most of all this was demonstrated by Crosland's initial commitment in the department to protect building resources, the education budget more generally, and address the problem of teacher supply (Crosland, 1965). For Wilma Harte, one of Crosland's civil servants, the ultimate success of the reorganization was Crosland's – the 'great push' had taken place under his leadership and

by the time he left the department the movement was inexorable; 'the important work had been done' (Harte, 1977).

Contrasting Crosland and Gove on one policy – school reorganization – highlights their similarities and their differences, and the continuities and changes in the educational landscape in England since the 1960s. Both operated under constraints of different kinds, Gove as a minister in a coalition (this constraint more apparent than real) and Crosland as a minister in a government (at least until 1966) with a very small majority. Yet both achieved, by their own lights, their aim in this area of policy. It has not been possible to look at the failures, which would also yield insights – for example Crosland's failure on public schools or Gove's on the history curriculum (Burn, 2015). What is incontestable, however, is that both – in radically different ways – restructured secondary schools with implications that would long outlive their tenures in office.

### **Conclusions: The politics of education, the role of the minister, and the possibilities of policy**

R.A. Butler, a former President of the Board of Education and sponsor of the eponymous Education Act, once infamously reduced politics to 'the art of the possible' (Butler, 1971). In relation to the politics of education, this undersold Butler's own contribution, even if it did reflect his approach as a practitioner. However, it is true that many education ministers have viewed the politics of education in precisely this light. The intelligentsia at large is familiar with the names of a few (and only a few) education ministers primarily due to this – most education ministers have been content to nudge, prompt, reorient, but otherwise survive. It has not been seen as a brief on the fast track to Number 10, and many of the inhabitants of the department's highest office have been seen as, at best, nondescript (Finn, 2015b: 3). Only one post-war Education Secretary has gone on to become Prime Minister (Margaret Thatcher) (Finn, 2015b). The status of the office did not soar over time, with it often being seen as a refuge for exiles. When R.A. Butler was offered the Presidency of the Board of Education by Churchill, the offer was 'intended as an insult' (Finn, 2015b: 3), given Butler's status as an appeaser and a supporter of Halifax (Howard, 1987). When Crosland received the call from Wilson nearly a quarter of a century later, his adviser, the Oxford sociologist Chelly Halsey, believed it was 'punishment from Wilson, because of Crosland's status as a Gaitskellite' (Nuttall, 2003: 146).

If some post-war education ministers were forgettable, this could not be said of either Crosland or Gove. Although both publicly disavowed it (and although Gove continues to), they both had high ambitions in terms of office. Crosland sought the Chancellorship (at least). Gove's sights may be set still higher. But to the credit of both, neither occupied the education brief with this thought uppermost in their minds. They sought, in different ways, to promote ideas of which they were convinced and to use the power of the minister to do so. Their two tenures, notwithstanding the considerable structural changes that had taken place in the intervening decades (and attendant technological and cultural changes, including the rise of 24-hour news media and the internet), illustrate the fact that a minister with an agenda in education and the support of the Prime Minister can, if minded to, achieve a great deal (in his or her own terms). It may even be that the rise of the 'differentiated polity' and the 'hollowing out of the state', as argued by Rod Rhodes, has been significantly overplayed (Rhodes, 1997).

Both ministers also showed that there are different ways to develop and implement policy, though both had agendas rooted in their ideology, and this is perhaps worth noting as a significant causal factor – that ideology is, in itself, a significant weapon in promoting change. Although it raises fierce opposition from those who disagree with its premises and values, it provides ardour and resilience (and, to a certain extent, coherence) to those who wish to advocate change. As

Simons puts it in the case of Gove, it provides ‘clarity’ (Simons, 2015: 118). It is not piecemeal. As I have written previously, Gove was successful ‘at least in part ... because’ his educational plans were ‘consonant with a broader Conservative politics’ (Finn, 2015b: 6). The same was true of Crosland, albeit in terms of a social democratic agenda. Ideology creates allies as well as enemies, and in both cases these allies helped deliver the final outcome.

As Crosland once noted, determining the *quality* or the ‘rightness’ of particular reforms, especially in relation to education, is a moral question (Crosland, 1966: 1) and one this author holds strong views on – but this is not the place for such reflection. What this article has instead sought to do is demonstrate that in education, for good or ill, ministers matter. The extent to which they matter depends on their political strength, individual characteristics, and coherence of view, not to mention the specific circumstances of the time. However, one feature worth noting is that with a small dedicated group, effectively led (or shepherded), it is possible to achieve a great deal in the field of education policy. In Gove’s case, this was in large part demolishing the house that Anthony built, replacing his comprehensive framework with a much more diverse secondary education system (though not, notably, reintroducing grammar schools – to which both he and his allies were opposed) (Simons, 2015: 121). This is a significant accomplishment in terms of the exercise of ministerial power, and one that brought Gove adulation from the right, and hatred from the left. Whether the Gove legacy endures as long as the Crosland legacy did – in school reorganization and beyond – will depend at least to some extent on the character of the ministers to come.

## Notes

1. I use the singular ‘government’ advisedly; there were actually two Wilson governments between 1964 and 1970, reflecting the fact that there was a general election in 1966 where the government increased its majority significantly. However, I am minded to refer to ‘government’ rather than ‘governments’ to avoid confusion with the later Wilson administration of 1974–6.
2. Although Crosland was closely associated at a personal level with Hugh Gaitskell and his project to make Labour electable once more, it is nonetheless true (as Martin Francis has shown) that his thought was both his own and had broader resonances for the party than simply the Gaitskellite right (Francis, 1997).
3. References here are to the 1964 edition, as the last edition published before Crosland became Secretary of State for Education and Science.

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