



FIONA MILLAR

# COULD DO BETTER

A NEW SCHOOL YEAR, A NEW EDUCATION SECRETARY – BUT WILL WE SEE ANY REAL CHANGES? IF WE DO, THEY'LL BE PR RATHER THAN POLICIES, PREDICTS FIONA MILLAR...

So, term begins for the first time in four years without Michael Gove as education secretary. How does that feel? Not great for my fellow hacks I suspect. Life will be duller for us without the former journalist's weekly announcements, florid language and populist newspaper articles. In fact it wouldn't surprise me if Mr Gove were to return to journalism eventually, possibly even ending up as editor of a national paper.

For the thousands of parents and teachers to whom he had become "toxic", in the words of his own government's off the record briefing, the immediate relief that followed his move to the office of Chief Whip may now have worn off. There is nothing quite as "ex" as an ex-minister. Power, patronage and knowledge transfer almost immediately to the successor.

No-one really knows much about the new broom Nicky Morgan, though she appears to be a more consensual politician than her predecessor. One profile writer even noted that she "soothed" the Commons in her first ministerial questions after taking over the reins in Sanctuary Buildings. Soothing is not something that Mr Gove could ever be accused of.

However once the dust has settled, relief may possibly seep into a slow grinding realisation that not much has changed. The pace of reform may have eased in the sense that there will be few new announcements and no major legislation in the near future – a deliberate becalming strategy in the run up to the general election.

But the implementation of many coalition policies is only just beginning. This summer's exam season was the first in which Gove's far-reaching changes to curriculum and qualifications started to edge their way through the system and into the lives of real pupils.

The end of modularity, coursework and re-takes, new grades and accountability measures, changes to course content, the de-coupling of AS from A levels and sixth form funding cuts are only the tip of an iceberg of reform which could take a decade to play out. The upheaval in schools means that even if there is a change of government next year, the reforms are unlikely to be unpicked in a hurry.

Some of the young people who will be affected by them are barely in secondary school; those who already are will find themselves caught on a cusp between the old and the new, something which many parents of children in that age bracket are acutely aware of and which may have contributed to Mr Gove's unpopularity.

The pay, performance management and workload issues that inflame the teacher unions aren't going away either,



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though it will be interesting to see whether, without the rancorous rhetoric that epitomised the Gove years, industrial action can be avoided.

So life may not feel very different unless Ms Morgan can pull off a political conjuring act and make the pace and reach of the Gove reforms feel suddenly palatable. One of the most interesting aspects of Mr Gove's demise, at least from my point of view as a commentator and school governor, was the mismatch between his increasingly tarnished reputation in schools (and amongst the wider electorate) and his almost mythical status as a bold reformer amongst the political classes and the commentariat. The hype within the Westminster bubble is heady, but best ingested in small doses.

Whatever one feels about the Gove reforms, too much is being done too quickly, without adequate consultation and piloting. It has also been too frequently accompanied by confrontation rather than dialogue and consensus. The latter may not make good copy for the Daily Mail but is more likely to encourage rather than demoralise the very people necessary to safeguard real improvement.

And this is the real lesson of the Gove years. You can't be a truly bold reformer unless you carry people with you. The pace of change is almost certainly set in stone now but if the new secretary of state can focus on the positive, highlight achievement rather than failure and engage with parents and professionals as partners not enemies, it may go some way

towards lightening the load at the classroom coalface as this new term begins and smooth rather than aggravate the passage of her predecessor's "revolution". It will also provide a valuable lesson to whomever may succeed her.

