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children



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Closing the opportunity gap: Michael Gove MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families

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The Labour Party, Harold Wilson, once argued, is a moral crusade or it is nothing. Repeat that rallying cry today and you invite mockery. And not because there is anything specific to the Labour Party which offends our ethical sensibilities.

No, it is politics itself which seems drained of moral energy, our whole system which looks worm-eaten and decayed.

The struggle against global forces which Government seems unequal to, and the tawdry pettiness of Westminster intrigues have generated a pervasive cynicism which undermines faith in the capacity of our politics to renew hope and effect change.

A great deal of attention has, naturally, been given recently to the technical questions of how we fight the recession and commentators have reflected on the wisdom of the different courses outlined. But less attention has been paid to the deeper, social, effects of recessionary times on our politics.

When elites have been seen to fail, when globalisation is associated with greed, waste and loss, when those who have been acclaimed as masters of the universe petulantly refuse to acknowledge their fault and cling to their privileges with no sense of shame then the currents of public opinion move, with great and turbulent force, down new channels.

There is profound public anger at the failures which have brought us to a situation where life savings have been robbed of their value, the hard work which built up honest enterprises has come to nothing and the taxpayer is asked to underwrite the folly and greed of men who treated him with disdain when they were in their pomp. There is also disbelief that leaders who pronounced with utter confidence that all was well in the world they ran and regulated now lament the lack of proper rules and plain dealing without a word of contrition, an approach at humility or an honest account of what was wrong with their past assumptions and why they now lie abandoned.

At this, most difficult of times, any politician trying to speak of moral purpose risks ridicule for himself and his party.

But it's precisely because there's been such an ebbing of confidence in politics that I believe we cannot simply fall back on managerialism. A politics which restricted itself to technocratic interventions and bureaucratic re-orderings would only confirm people's poor opinion of their politicians.

If we are to restore faith in politics, restore faith in the capacity of people working together to achieve more through their common endeavour than they can as isolated individuals, restore faith in the importance of reconciling differences to benefit from diversity rather than exaggerating them in the hope of winning a selfish advantage, then we need to restore a sense of moral purpose to our efforts. And that is why I am so glad to be speaking to this audience tonight.

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The precious worth of every soul

Because the history, and the trajectory, of your charity remind us of what the moral purpose of our politics should be.

The story of Thomas Barnardo's work bringing hope, and relief from suffering, to the poor of Victorian London is, I know, a continuing inspiration to those who work in this organisation. And the passage of time does nothing to diminish its relevance.

Child poverty today remains a terrible blight. It is a reproach to all of us that so many children should be growing up in homes deprived not just of the resources which allow them to play a full and equal part in our society but of the basic security they need to live free of fear.

Thomas Barnardo's work was pioneering and brave. He took many children out of circumstances which would have condemned them to lives of misery and gave them new hope. The passion he brought to his work meant he enjoyed the support of two of the most influential Conservative politicians of his time in his mission.

He should have had every right to feel satisfied with the difference he had made.

But he always reproached himself for not doing more. On one occasion an eleven year-old-boy was turned away from his shelter because there was no bed to accommodate him. Two days later the boy, John Somers, who had been nicknamed 'Carrots' was found dead. He was seriously malnourished and eventually succumbed to exposure. The loss of that single life, a loss which could have been averted, bore terribly on Thomas Barnardo's conscience, even though he was already doing more to bring relief to the poor than almost any man of his time. Inspired by his Christian belief that every soul was precious, every life of equal value, he determined to ensure that no child who needed help would ever be denied it. And from that day his shelter displayed the sign, 'No Destitute Child Ever Refused Admission'.

The moral impulse behind that declaration - the belief that every child is important and nothing is more important than helping the poorest children - is as urgent and relevant today as it was in Victorian times.

That moral impulse is at the heart of the campaign to eradicate child poverty which I know Barnardo's has done so much to lead, and which I and my party wholeheartedly support.

And it also lies at the heart of the work we are doing - in the Conservative Party - to transform our country's education system.

THE MORAL PURPOSE OF CONSERVATIVE EDUCATIONAL REFORM - MAKING OPPORTUNITY MORE EQUAL

Our approach to education reform is driven, explicitly, by a sense of moral purpose. We believe education is a good in itself, the key not just to economic well-being but a richer inner life and a more civilized society. We believe education is the key to personal growth and independence - a good education should give every child the chance to become author of their own life story - shaping their own destiny, not the victim of forces beyond their control. And we believe the current distribution of educational opportunity in this country is indefensibly unequal, denying children from poorer backgrounds the opportunities the wealthier take for granted.

It is a specific tragedy of our times that the educational opportunity gap should remain so wide.

One in five children who leave school do so without a single C pass at GCSE - effectively deprived of any qualification an employer would value.

And that sad statistic is lent extra poignancy when we examine how much that lack of opportunity is concentrated among poorer children. Of the 75,000 GCSE-age pupils who received free school meals last year a total of 31,647 - just over 42 per cent - failed to get a single C pass in any GCSE.

A single year produces a single snapshot - but when we look at the wider panorama of educational opportunity the landscape looks even bleaker - because as children from poorer homes go through the educational system they fall further and further behind their more fortunate contemporaries.

In 2002, at the end of Key Stage 2, when they were 11, the gap between the number of pupils eligible for free school meals reaching the appropriate level of progress - level 4 - and the number of their contemporaries reaching that level was 10 points in science, 16 points in maths and 26 points in English.

In 2005, when the same pupils reached Key Stage 3, the gap between those FSM pupils reaching the expected level - level 5 - and their contemporaries was 27 points for English, 27 points for maths and 30 points for science.

In 2007, when the time came to take GCSEs just 21.1% of pupils eligible for free school meals got five good GCSEs including English and Maths compared to 49% of non Free School Meals pupils. A gap of nearly 28%.

And when it comes to A-levels, the gap is starkest of all. More than 26,000 pupils got 3 As at A level last year. Yet the number of FSM pupils securing passes was just 189.

FSM pupils make up around 13% of the entire cohort in each school year - yet they form under 1% of those securing the passport qualifications for the top universities. Indeed the number of boys eligible for free school meals getting 3 As last year was just 65. While the number of boys at Eton getting 3 As was 175. One school getting more than 200% the level of passes secured by the entire male population eligible for free school meals.

And equally scandalously in the independent sector, which educates just seven per cent of children, more students got 3 grade As at A level than in the entire comprehensive sector. The percentage gap between the numbers securing 3As at A level has also grown in the last ten years. It used to be a twelve percentage point gap, now its twenty-two points.

A huge, apparently unbridgeable, certainly indefensible, opportunity gulf. And one which gets wider as times goes on. As children go through our education system the gap between the fortunate and the forgotten only grows. This widening gap is an affront to our national conscience. And tackling it head on is a central mission for the Conservative Party.

WHY INEQUALITY MUST END

The principal reason for tackling this scandal has to be moral. It cannot be right that so many will have so few opportunities simply because of accidents of birth and family circumstance. One does not have to share the evangelical Christianity of Thomas Barnardo to recognise the precious quality of each individual and the ethical imperative to value all equally.

And beyond the moral requirement to rescue thousands from blighted lives it is in all our interests to maximise the potential of each. Because the more our society recognises, nurtures and rewards talent in every generation, the more wealth, opportunity and beauty we create for each other.

In Thomas Gray's famous Elegy in Country Churchyard the poet reflects on the individuals buried in the Stoke Poges soil whose poverty meant they never had the chance to fulfil their potential, or the opportunity to mount a stage on which their talents could shine.

How many mute inglorious Miltons or village Hampdens were there in the cold Buckinghamshire ground? The question Gray asked then could be asked, in a way, just as easily now. How many of those children who are currently born into poverty and who do not succeed at school could, in the right circumstances, become great talents? How many mute inglorious Darwins or village Paxmans fail to have their energy and intellect channelled into real and lasting achievement?

The moral tragedy inherent in failing to maximise the next generation's potential is profound. And the consequences of that failure will only grow more painful as time passes.

Because the opportunities open to those with truncated or limited educational achievements are diminishing daily. Globalisation has brought, and continues to bring, many benefits. But one of the consequences of globalisation is that the number of jobs in Britain available to those with few, or no, qualifications is shrinking. And the wages for doing those jobs will only shrink as well, in comparison to the rewards open to the well-qualified.

As a nation we cannot afford to continue to waste talent on the scale we are doing. We will not be able to compete if we fail to make the most of every individual's ability.

In the past some on the Right have argued that in education more means worse. More children following an academic curriculum can only be achieved at the cost of diluting the quality of the curriculum and so the whole enterprise is inherently damaging to the idea of excellence.

I completely reject that idea. I believe that the more children we educate rigorously, to enable them to follow a stretching academic curriculum, the more our society benefits. And not just incrementally, individual by individual, but exponentially as the space for common endeavour widens.

Network theory teaches us that the more connections each of us individuals can make the greater the scope for innovation. More ideas are bounced off more collaborators, more intuitions resonate, more theories are tested, more breakthroughs occur. The virtuous dynamics at work in an environment such as Silicon Valley or Cambridge Science Park, where concentrations of talent acted as forcing-houses of innovation, underline how adding to the number of those who are highly qualified multiplies the scope for growth and scientific or cultural achievement.

So the pursuit of greater equality of opportunity, the demand that we ensure every child is stretched as far as possible, is not the enemy of excellence but the generator of the truly excellent.

SCHOOL REFORM - THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW

Now there are some - on the left as well as the right - who may acknowledge the desirability of educating many, many more children to a higher level but who fear that our schools can do little to re-shape the destinies of children whose fate will have been sealed before any formal education can ever begin.

It is undoubtedly the case that family background and a million different factors - from what happens in the womb to the presence of a consistent male authority figure - can profoundly influence a child's

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prospects and ability to achieve. And policies to give every child the best possible start in life are crucial - which is why we have devoted attention to developing a universal health visitor service, to focussing Surestart on the most disadvantaged, on implementing a version of the Dutch kraamzorg or state maternity nurse system and on supporting parental commitment.

But I think it's a bleak and blinkered sort of defeatism which seeks to minimise or play down the transformative potential of great schools. The very best schools, in this country and abroad, have shown that children can come from damaged backgrounds, burdened with low expectations and handicapped by a lack of stability at home and they can still succeed, by any measure.

The best American charter schools, such as those run by the Knowledge is Power Programme, KIPP, specifically target children from disadvantaged homes, often from visible ethnic minority backgrounds, where expectations have been historically low. And by applying certain tried and tested, thoroughly traditional, teaching methods alongside technical innovation, they get fantastic results.

Children work hard. The school days are long. The school year is long. The home environment is not always, to put it mildly, conducive to learning so children are given the chance to spend as much time as possible in the school environment where they can engage in purposeful learning.

Discipline is strict. Children are expected to show good manners and consideration. Old-fashioned virtues, specifically respect for elders, for learning, for knowledge as a good in itself, permeate every lesson.

Teachers are leaders. They commit to work harder than the norm in order to lead by example. They refuse to accept excuses for shoddy or inadequate work on the basis of background and expect high standards from every child. They are highly-qualified people who inspire their students with a love of knowledge because they are themselves committed to the life of the mind.

And bureaucracy is minimal. In order to hire good teachers and pay them properly the schools operate outside the local authority rules. In order to shape a curriculum which gives children who arrive unable to read properly the chance to succeed the bureaucratic playbook is ripped up and intensive tuition is the norm. In order to innovate, to stretch, to excel, these schools have to be run outside the rigidities of the prevailing local and central government system.

The results in the KIPP schools speak for themselves. Children from the bottom quartile of achievement making it to the top. Children from homes where high school graduation was beyond expectations going on to college and taking the path to professional success. Children who had been written off becoming the authors of their own life stories.

And what programmes such as KIPP have achieved in America the best schools are succeeding in accomplishing here.

Schools such as Mossbourne Community Academy in Hackney, the Harris group of Academies in South London, the ULT academies across the country, ARK academies such as Burlington Danes in Hammersmith and the original CTCs such as Haberdasher's Aske's Hatcham in Lewisham and Brooke Weston in Corby are comprehensives in working class communities transforming the lives of children who were once forgotten.

All these schools apply similar principles to those which charter schools such as those in the KIPP programme have deployed to such good effect.

At Mossbourne the school day and week are lengthened to provide extra support. There and at Burlington Danes the first year of secondary education has been re-modelled, outside the expected national curriculum lines, to concentrate on eradicating illiteracy and ensuring a sound base of mathematical knowledge. Uniform policy across all these schools is strictly enforced as part of a traditional approach to discipline. Enter the classroom in Haberdashers or Mossbourne and the children rise, politely, out of respect.

At all these schools the expectation is that children will be taught to reach a base level of academic achievement. The idea that GCSE English or Maths should be beyond children from disadvantaged backgrounds is rejected. And in schools which take a significant proportion of children who are eligible for free school meals or who have special educational needs, academic achievement is formidable. Mossbourne had the best value added scores in the country at Key Stage Three. The oldest established Harris academies, replacing schools where less than a third got five good GCSEs, now generate passes which mean the majority leaving sixth form are capable of going onto university.

The challenge for all of us is to see the excellence and innovation at work in these schools spread much, much more widely within the state system.

The problem, however, is that those at the sharp edge of the reforms which have driven up standards in our poorest areas feel the momentum for reform has vanished.

Just the other week the Independent Academies Association, the body which speaks for the schools which have helped transform education for the poorest, warned that the special factors which allowed them to make a difference had been eroded since Gordon Brown became Prime Minister.

They argued that "with every consultation, each missive and even new legislation there comes further erosion of the independent status of academies." They pointed out that the efforts of academy principals "to positively impact on driving up educational standards and progress are being increasingly hampered by requirements to bow to the whims of quangos and to abide by national regulations."

"In order to turn around endemic educational under-performance" they explain, "it was recognised that new organisations had to be established that would be freed from the vagaries of local bureaucracy. Independence represented not merely structural changes but a whole new mindset". But, under this Government, the academies leaders explain, there has been such a level of "encroachment on the independent status of academies" that it has had a serious "impact upon the ability to.... secure transformational change in the education system."

I believe there is something dangerously wrong when those most committed to transforming the educational opportunities of the poorest are alarmed in this way by the Government's actions.

That's why I believe we need to recover the reforming energy which first animated the academies programme - and radically extend it.

COMPREHENSIVE EXCELLENCE

We need a comprehensive programme for radical school reform - designed to bring down the curtain on the tragedy of educational failure.

Firstly, we need to ensure that all academies enjoy the freedoms which they were originally promised, and which the Brown Government has curtailed - freedoms over the curriculum, staffing, procurement and construction, freedom from local bureaucracy and centralising directives.

But we need to go much further. We need to ensure that educational under-achievement is tackled at root - where it is most entrenched. In those local authority areas where schools have been under-performing for years, where there has been stultifying monopoly control of the council, where there is no sign of real improvement and no satisfactory explanation for continued failure we would take schools out of the hands of the local bureaucracy and hand them over to organisations with a proven record of educational success.

In some of our local authorities the number of children who are securing three good As at A level is tiny, the numbers securing five good GCSE passes still stubbornly low. Rather than allowing this situation to persist we need urgently to introduce diversity and innovation into the system. Wherever monopolies exist the establishment needs to be challenged and those let down need an alternative approach. We know that when complacent local bureaucracies are challenged, and schools are set up under alternative management, then a chain reaction begins which results in improvement all round.

We've seen that happen in social democratic Sweden, where new providers have been welcomed into the state system to provide an alternative, socially comprehensive model, to the education provided by local bureaucracies. The result has been an improvement in standards all round, with parents offered an opportunity to escape from failing schools and those responsible for under-performance driven to change their ways in order to persuade parents to stay.

Because parent power has proven such a powerful lever for improving standards in Sweden we'll introduce similar reforms here. We'll remove the barriers which currently prevent more people entering the state system to operate new schools, and we'll allow parents to take the money the state currently spends on their child's education and use it to secure the education they want for their children in schools which are going out of their way to meet parental needs.

Reform in Sweden has proven most popular with ethnic minority parents and reform to provide greater choice here is already popular - with support rising the further down the socio-economic scale you go. Which is entirely understandable when you consider that the current system disadvantages the poorest and they are currently denied the choice the wealthy can buy for their children.

REFORM HELPS THE POOREST MOST

The evidence that poorer parents harbour the highest aspirations for their children is there in the numbers of parents denied their first choice of school in so many London boroughs. In a working class borough like Lewisham huge numbers of parents long to get their child into a first class comprehensive such as Haberdasher's Aske's but there simply aren't the places. The existence of a great school on their doorstep means they know success is achievable for children from any background. And the fact other neighbourhood schools don't match up is a cause of grave disappointment. It's precisely these parents that any new provider would be likely to target - disaffection with the current system is greatest amongst the most disadvantaged - and that is where the opportunity to make the biggest difference exists.

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And to ensure that reform brings the greatest benefits to the poorest we will change the way schools are funded to ensure that children from poorer backgrounds have more spent on their education. We will introduce a pupil premium so that each child from a poorer home, such as those eligible for free school meals, will bring a proportionately higher amount with them when they are enrolled in any school. More money will follow poorer pupils. And thus new providers will be powerfully incentivised to locate in the areas of greatest deprivation.

But there is one group of children who need help more than any other. Educational performance among looked-after children is tragically poor compared to other students. Just 12.6 per cent of looked after children get five good GCSEs of any kind. The attainment gap between looked after children and other children has also grown at GCSE, from 46.3% in 2005 to 49.4% in 2008.

We know that looked after children can, however, flourish as fully as any other student in the right environment. If they enjoy stability, if they are in a school with a critical mass of children geared to achieve, and if they are in an environment with structures, boundaries and superb pastoral care they can excel like any other student.

There is one group of looked after children who have significantly exceeded expectations who have, when placed in the right environment, gone on to great things. Those are looked after children who have been placed in a boarding school.

Residential placements have enabled foster carers, and indeed family members who couldn't cope otherwise, to look after children during holidays secure in the knowledge those they love are safe and achieving for the bulk of the year.

Of those looked after children placed in boarding schools 39 per cent become star performers on a range of social emotional and academic criteria within three years, performing three times as well as the average level of achievement secured by other state boarders. In a study of 97 vulnerable children placed in state boarding schools, 85 per cent were performing as well as, or better than all the others in the school.

I believe there is considerably further we can go in expanding state provision of boarding school places. The Government has a pathfinder scheme to provide residential school places for children in need but so far only 17 children have been placed.

There are many, many, more looked after children who could benefit from the expansion of residential education and I believe that this uniquely deserving group should be also be able to take advantage of the improvements pioneered by academy schools.

That is why I want to explore setting up new, state-funded and supported, residential academies to allow academy providers and other organisations with a background in education and child welfare to open schools with a residential facility so that children in the greatest need can secure a placement which offers them the very highest standards of education and care.

Working with local authorities, the money which follows looked after children through the care system could be channelled, alongside our pupil premium, to provide new provision for those we have failed in the past.

This is about making sure we spend public money which is already there to help the most vulnerable with the most successful models of provision. There is recurrent funding in the system which could be deployed to pay for this care and we will ensure that residential academies can access capital funding on fair terms, like other new academies.

We believe our supply side changes have the potential to introduce a virtuous dynamic into state education with the potential to transform prospects for the very poorest for years to come. But we recognise that the benefits of such structural changes take years to feed through.

DRIVING STANDARDS UP FROM DAY ONE

Which is why we will introduce other reforms designed to drive standards up as quickly as possible.

We will invite every school which is already high-achieving to apply for academy status, with the freedoms and benefits that bring, provided they produce an action plan showing how they will use their new freedoms to help a currently under-performing school. That way we will liberate the strong to help the weak.

We will introduce greater flexibility into the recruitment and rewards system for teachers so that we can attract more talented people into the profession. We'll allow schools to pay more for subject specialists, expand the Teach First programme to get more of the very best graduates into the classroom, we'll make it easier for people in mid-career to switch to teaching and we'll provide routes for professional development, deepening subject knowledge and staying abreast of university breakthroughs, which will allow teachers to play the fullest possible part in the academic and intellectual life of the nation.

We will change our testing and assessment system to reduce bureaucracy and concentrate on the essentials. That means a single test after two years of primary school to ensure every child who can is reading fluently.

We know that unless children have learnt to read they cannot read to learn. We know that there are tried and tested methods which can get all children, unless they have particular special needs, reading fluently early. Longitudinal studies have shown that systematic synthetic phonics, properly taught, can eliminate reading failure. Synthetic phonics is particularly effective in helping children from more disadvantaged, book-poor backgrounds, to read and where it has been consistently applied, in some of Scotland's poorest areas, illiteracy has been ended.

There is almost nothing more important than getting reading right. At least twenty per cent of the children who leave primary school every year have a reading age so low they cannot properly follow what is being taught at secondary school. These children become disaffected, and disruptive, they are more likely to truant, become persistently absent, to involve themselves in gang culture and worse. Getting children reading as soon as possible is one of the wisest early interventions we can make.

We will reform our exam system to make sure that it can stand comparison with the world's best. For decades now there has been an erosion of academic rigour which has gathered pace in the last few years, to the point where those who can are issuing a vote of no confidence in the state exam system.

The decision last week by Manchester Grammar School to abandon the state's GCSEs for the independent IGCSE marks a tipping point with almost 200 independent schools opting for alternative exams. We need urgently to address this new opportunity gap, by which the schools open to the most fortunate children offer more stretching exams and the schools which teach the poorest can only offer less rigorous qualifications. We would allow all schools to pursue the most stretching qualifications and we would require a new exams regulator to ensure our state exams were benchmarked against the world's best.

And also, crucially, we would tackle the problems with poor behaviour and discipline which blight the opportunities of so many, especially the poorest, and which act as such a powerful barrier to attracting talent into the classrooms where they are most needed.

Research by Policy Exchange has revealed that fear of being unsafe in the classroom is the biggest single disincentive which puts talented graduates off teaching. And we know that rates of truancy and incidents of violence, indeed almost every measure of poor behaviour, are worse in poorer areas.

That is why we have a comprehensive plan to help ensure better behaviour and proper discipline in our school.

We will allow schools to introduce enforceable home school contracts outlining what is expected of every child, and parent. In the best state schools teachers visit students and their parents in their home to help build the right sort of attitudes towards learning and participation in school.

We will provide the best possible protection for teachers. The law will be changed to allow for the confiscation of any device prejudicial to good order in school. Teachers will enjoy anonymity if faced with complaints from pupils and there will be a time limit by which any allegation against a teacher must be investigated or dropped.

We will ensure schools have the resources and legal backing to enforce proper uniform policies, enabling them to ban trainers, buzzcuts and gang colours, ensuring that the culture of the street stops at the school gate.

And we will give heads the power to exclude those children whose behaviour is so persistently, dangerously, disruptive that they are a threat to the order of the school and the safety of others without the danger of a bureaucracy second-guessing the decision and undermining legitimate authority within the school.

But with the power to exclude comes a corresponding responsibility to provide for the excluded.

We know, as I mentioned earlier, that some of those children who are most disruptive are those who have been most badly failed. They are the boys who have never been taught to read properly and cover up their shame with macho bravado. They are the students who have never grown up with boundaries and so do not appreciate how dangerously they cross the line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. They are often the children who were starved of love and never shown respect when young so they purchase a form of respect by attracting attention to themselves through swagger, anger and violence.

If we believe, as I do, that every soul is precious then these children, with their fractured pasts, who have been failed so often, deserve better in the future.

It is not just the classes they disrupt who lose out if they continually misbehave, they also harm their own

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prospects, they deny themselves the room to grow.

Which is why it's so important that we provide these children with new hope. That is why I believe the opening up of alternative educational provision to new providers is so important. I believe we need to see the same sense of innovation and high ambition we have already seen in the academy programme in the educational establishments which cater for excluded children.

And here I also think there is space for educational providers, and organisations with a background in child welfare, to collaborate. I want to encourage professionals with academic and pastoral skills to work together. And I believe that providing more state boarding places could also help here. Placing some difficult and challenging children in an environment away from the temptations of the street, where academic expectations are higher and boundaries more rigorously, and sensitively policed could be transformative.

The costs of failing these children are huge, for them, and for us, so investing now in new thinking seems to me to be the plainest common sense.

I recognise that the scale of change we need if we are to properly tackle educational failure in this country is massive, because the depth and range of the problems is so huge. That is why our programme is so ambitious, and so radical. We believe there is an urgent imperative to transform the opportunities of the poorest in our society, or risk deep and potentially irreparable social fracture. For the modern Conservative Party education reform is a moral crusade - and when it comes to helping the poorest we will stop at nothing.