



‘There is a myth that politicians seem to feel a need to tell, namely that of brokenness and repair.’

Huw Thomas, headteacher, Emmaus primary school, Sheffield, and education writer



Teachers deserve a leader with a story to tell

Too many past education secretaries have failed to inspire. Whoever next seizes the reins will find a profession ripe for dialogue, says **Huw Thomas**, so long as they are prepared to listen and to lead

‘Would I like to be chancellor at some point in the future? Of course I would. I’d love it.’ So declared Ed Balls in his *New Statesman* interview last year. Had Gordon Brown not been so weakened by the local and European elections Balls would have had his wish last June. If Labour win in May, it’s certain. On the other hand, a Tory victory could see Michael Gove in the job. Either way, there’ll be a new education secretary the summer. To quote Dylan Thomas: ‘It all means nothing at all.’ Unless, that is, a far more important person steps into Sanctuary Buildings on May 7, namely, a leader.

Ask a group of teachers to name past education secretaries and the chances are they will manage to recall the present one. Past ones don’t stand a hope because successive secretaries have failed to lead the profes-

sion. Anyone doubting this should reflect on two words: Charles Clarke. See – you’d forgotten him already. And who remembers Ruth Kelly?

Certain names faithfully crop up – topped by Blunkett and Baker. They do so for a simple reason. Whatever your views on their leadership, it was leadership. Baker fought off Mrs Thatcher to carve out a space in which he could promote standards and choice. Blunkett turned hype into substance with a swift deployment of strategies that, whatever else they did, can be credited with raising standards in core learning. Crucially, both were interested. Both brought enthusiasm to the job, whereas Ed Balls would rather be doing something else.

It all raises the question: what is an education secretary there for? He or she should be there for children and parents, but to make this happen there’s one other rein of leadership a new incumbent should grasp, namely, leadership of the profession. Without this, a wandering profession becomes lost.

Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, talks of leadership in relation

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to a workforce hacking its way through a jungle. A good manager ensures the teams are well rotated and machetes are sharpened. A good leader is ‘the one who climbs the tallest tree, surveys the entire situation and yells “Wrong jungle!”’

Good education leadership involves just such an intelligent grasp of direction and that is what the profession needs. We’re currently lost between the pathways of Excellence and Enjoyment, finding one up against the other. The truism barked back when you suggest this is that the two need not be in conflict. True, but thanks to the way they are currently defined, they are. There’s no point giving me a Rose review, and the fluffy encouragement to develop the curriculum, if, like me, you are in a school where the attainment agenda hangs like the sword of Damocles. I’m not at my most creative with that dangling over me.

A leader needs to review the attainment agenda, not letting up on the drive for standards, but rather asking whether their narrow definition has damaged the learning experiences of children. At key stage 2, the drive to attain level 4 in Sat tests has skewed education. The creativity of writing is sapped by the need to deliver scripts that markers can mince into a turgid mark scheme, with the result that children don’t use adjectives for literary reasons – they use them for an extra mark.

In such confused wanderings, we have the undignified spectacle of the Education Secretary panicking in

the face of a union boycott of Sats tests and sending out the recent publication, ‘Getting the balance right’, attempting to resolve the Government of responsibility for the imbalance it has created through an over-reliance on data-driven evaluation.

To provide such direction a leader needs to shape the narrative of the journey. Howard Gardner, in his book *Leading Minds*, highlights this facet: ‘Leaders achieve their effectiveness chiefly through the stories they relate.’ However, the vital ingredient of such stories, if they are to lead, is authenticity.

There is a myth that politicians seem to feel a need to tell, namely that of brokenness and repair. It isn’t just a Cameron thing. The recycling of old policies has to be presented in terms of ‘fixing’ – whether that be hospitals or schools. There’s something almost mythological about it – the need for a beauty to rescue, a dragon to slay.

We can do without another big fix. Michael Gove may tout the notion that we become more Swedish and Ed Balls is keen to boost trust status, but what we most need now is a shaping of the current story. This involves looking back on changes to date and undertaking the sort of fine tuning and nuanced reform that improves on 20 years of big story changes. We need to ask some really interesting questions, such as: if a child has a chance of gaining a level 4 in writing, provided time they would spend doing art is sacrificed to this end, what should we do? Interesting – because we’ll be turning round and looking at children.

We have yet to see an education secretary shape the narrative in a way that maximises the buy-in from the profession. Blunkett did it briefly with strategies that were actually well received on the ground, and the mixed feelings about the agreeing of the curriculum gave Baker a small, similar moment. Done properly and intelligently, it could prove powerful.

Shaping a narrative involves reflective understanding, otherwise a leader can easily be easily drawn into the sorts of myths that lead astray. The day after the ’97 election Blunkett caught the train from Sheffield to St Pancras, became secretary of state and, that night, dined with Michael Barber and others, and pulled

together the standards and effectiveness unit, gathering the thinking that had fuelled their previous three years into a way forward for schools. The next secretary needs a similar attention span and a good meal. He or she needs to take the time Gardner labels 'Going to the Mountaintop,' noting the tension in leadership between being attuned to the community and knowing your own mind.

Taking the time to learn and reflect is so at odds with a politics dominated by the news cycle and need for spin, but it would be truly refreshing to hear some authentic thinking. This will be vital if another Labour government runs the public services. A new secretary needs to define ideas. Old governments risk running out of thinking – remember John Major's 'cones hotline'. Equally they can overcompensate for this, as Baker possibly did after the 1987 victory. Somewhere between these extremes a leader needs to find out precisely what needs to be done, and know their own mind in response.

To this end, a new secretary needs to listen to the profession. There is also that tie to the community. Baker tells cheery stories about how Mrs Thatcher would appear at meetings reporting that her hairdresser 'was worried that her children were going to be educated by a lot of Trots.' I do feel like I've spent my career on a bandwagon set rolling by the old dear's hairdresser. I've implemented every reform sent my way: I've sold them to staff, I've enthused where I might feel less than keen. I talk to other teachers and

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reckon that we now have the most interesting and diverse profession I've seen. Two decades of changes received in varying ways creates an incredible resource of practitioners ripe for dialogue. It isn't the case that every change is resisted and resented. It is the case that, having experienced them, those of us actually in school can see how they could better reach the aims they profess.

Many of us would not scrap Ofsted, but have ideas about how it can achieve more genuine evaluation and improvement. We wouldn't scrap the national curriculum, indeed we welcome improvements in core subject teaching. We do have ideas for making learning more inspiring and exciting. At a push we may not want rid of Sats, but will have views on how they can become less farcical and more a time of genuine assessment. Instead of letting us set up our own schools we may have good ideas that would work in the ones we currently occupy.

If listened to, the next secretary of state will find the profession a lot more nuanced, engaged and creative than any of think tanks that throw out some of the absurdities around which politicians are currently sniffing. We may even know a thing or two more than Mrs Thatcher's hairdresser.

Unions can't shape the narrative; their pretence of interest in the stuff of education is sweet, but we know what they are there for. There was a chance the General Teaching Council could become a channel for such discourse, but the version we were given is now more intent on catching teachers with their trousers down – more 'Carry On' than consultation. The result is a profession so confused that we are about to launch the most mistimed and bungled boycott of Sats imaginable, a token of the disappointment and frustration felt by a profession that feels led by those who do not hear us.

In the end it doesn't seem such a revolutionary proposition. Whoever is next charged with leading education should give the profession direction and should shape a thoughtful and honest narrative that can inspire us. It doesn't seem revolutionary to suggest that whoever leads education should lead teachers.