



# **1988-2021: How Seventeen Secretaries of State for Education, through Thirty Years of Constant Change, Enabled the System to Improve**

**Michael Barber and Patrick Law**



# Contents

- 3 Preface: A word in their defence, personal observations from Michael Barber**
- 6 Dramatis Personae: The Seventeen**
- 9 Section One: What were they like?**
- 13 Section Two: What were the challenges of office?**
- 16 Section Three: What did they learn?**
- 29 Section Four: Party political perspective**
- 33 Section Five: Profiles of the Seventeen**
- 51 Section Six: 1998 – 2021: An idiosyncratic and highly selective chronology**
- 55 Bibliography**

## Preface: A word in their defence, personal observations from Michael Barber

I'll lay my cards on the table at the outset; I'm sympathetic to politicians. I like them. I try to see the world from their point of view. I don't assume they are all rogues, quite the opposite. Of course, politicians who make it to Cabinet rank have ambition. Why should they be different in that respect from anyone else? But remember that, having braved the (often brutal) selection process for parliamentary candidates, they have been willing to put themselves up for election and fight it out in a constituency. They have learnt how to function in the confrontational bear pit of parliament and, finally, they have accepted office in government in the full glare of publicity (90 percent of which is negative) for a reason. Yes, they want power but not just for its own sake; they want it because they hope to change the world for the better. That requires talent, courage, optimism and, in Gavin Williamson's words, "the hide of a rhinoceros" (or at least the ability to pretend you have one).

Naive of me? Perhaps. But here's the fundamental point – democracy depends on people who are willing to take on these roles and functions. If you believe profoundly in democracy and the rule of law, then, like it or not, politicians of whatever party are your people. That doesn't mean they're all saints. Of course not. They are weak and feeble human beings, like the rest of us. And, also like the rest of us, sometimes they err, occasionally disastrously. Except that in their case the errors are very public. There are of course, as in every walk of life, occasional rogues.

To succeed, ministers, almost daily, must calculate the effect of what they say and do on their colleagues and public servants, their electorate, the public generally

and perhaps, most of all, on the PM who determines whether they rise or fall. The Chancellor of the Exchequer is often on their mind too – after the PM's patronage, the Chancellor's purse is the most powerful influence in the government.

The fact that they make these calculations does not make them bad people; it's an essential part of the job. It shows they understand that to shape things in the way they aspire to do, they need a sophisticated understanding of the processes and relationships on which success depends. What makes this so much harder for a leading politician, is that what they do is constantly in the public eye – and the media rush to judgement, almost always with a sceptical frame of mind. Sometimes healthy scepticism slips into unhealthy cynicism.

The media will consistently question not just the actions of politicians but their motives. This isn't wrong either – a free, enquiring press is as important to democracy as elected politicians. But it does mean that it takes a historical perspective to understand what any individual minister, government or series of governments, actually achieved. A historical perspective also makes it possible to identify, as politics evolves (there have been seven PMs and ten Chancellors of the Exchequer, as well as 17 Secretaries of State for Education in the period we are discussing), what stays the same, what changes and what consistent threads of strategic policy there are over the long run.

You could look back over the 30 years we examine in this publication and conclude with Voltaire that "history is nothing more than a tableau of crimes and misfortune". Many will. You might not like any or all of what happened, but I ask you as you read this brief account to reflect on two thoughts.

1. Success in democracies depends on there being people who can master the (sometimes dark) arts of politics to advance their cause and pursue their moral purpose. Writing in 1863, a famous and reputable journalist wrote that Lincoln's every move as president "has been calculated...to shield and protect slavery." Weeks later the same journalist was enthusiastically welcoming Lincoln's famous Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln had been calculating with the political shrewdness of which he was a master - the timing of its publication, because he knew he had to get it right. There was only one chance to do so - if he announced it at the wrong moment, he might lose the war, enabling slavery to become permanent. In addition to his profoundly moral principles, therefore, it was Lincoln's acute tactical awareness, not lack of it, that enabled him to achieve immortality). High-flown principles alone rarely change anything - and sometimes set things back.

2. Over the 30 years or so years since Kenneth Baker became Secretary of State for Education - certainly until the pandemic struck - our education system improved immensely. There are now many more good schools than 30 years ago, far fewer bad schools, vastly more good teachers and far fewer poor ones - and the generation of young people now in our colleges and universities is the best educated generation in the history of our country.

Incidentally too, we come out reasonably well in international comparisons, at least holding our own,

and, in the most recent Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), performing as well as the much-vaunted Finnish school system (which is tiny in comparison to ours) and as well or better than the Scottish system (which is significantly better funded). Girls' achievement has improved beyond the wildest dreams of 1980s progressive thinking. Bangladeshi-heritage students have overtaken the national average, which seemed unthinkable in the mid-1990s; Pakistani-heritage students have almost closed that gap too. Of course, there are many problems too and no grounds for complacency. There is much more to do across the board while the underachievement of boys from white, low-income backgrounds remains a huge challenge. In terms of education outcomes, the country is far from levelled-up despite the undoubted progress made.

While the pandemic has posed a massive new challenge to the achievement of excellence and equity, a challenge to which our system will have to rise in the years ahead, that doesn't invalidate the achievements of the last three decades. In fact, those achievements ought to give us confidence that we can succeed in overcoming the new challenge we now face. We have the resilience and the sense of moral purpose to overcome the devastating setback. Perhaps surprisingly - perhaps to their own surprise - teachers, school leaders and administrators, as well as our Seventeen Secretaries of State, have much of which they can be proud.

It would take another paper to fully explain this progress. We can point out right here, however, some of the key elements which run through our period; a consistent emphasis on standards in the basics, devolution of budgets and responsibility to school level, clear accountability in various forms, a willingness to act when underperformance is evident, significant improvements in recruiting, training and developing teachers of quality (which Teach First exemplifies) and remarkable

improvements in school leadership. We might add, admittedly with ups and downs along the way, a significant increase in the proportion of national income devoted to schools, investment in the renewal of school buildings and the establishment of digital infrastructure.

Over the last several months, Patrick Law and I interviewed 14 of the 16 living former Secretaries of State for Education. We left the current incumbent, Nadhim Zahawi, alone as he settled in. (The two we were unable to track down were John MacGregor and John Patten). This paper is based substantially on those interviews but also draws on other relevant commentary and insight. It is not a history of education over the last 30 years, more a reflection on those turbulent times. In our conversations, we focused mainly on schools, and much less on skills or higher education, important though they are, because this paper was commissioned to commemorate the 150th anniversary of universal elementary education in 2020. It is a sequel to *Ten Characters Who Made a School System*, published by FED last year. Like all good conversations, however, these ones ranged widely and our ministers often reflected on their regret at not having done more to tackle issues in further education.

By focusing on the Secretaries of State we are aware of having not given sufficient attention to some vitally important figures in the period. Andrew Adonis, David Miliband and Nick Gibb were extremely influential political figures, for example. And in a complete history of the period many officials would appear too, some whose influence stretched across decades - Chris Wormald, David Bell and Christine Gilbert would be examples.

We are very grateful to the former Secretaries of State

we interviewed for their time and thought. Without exception they spoke frankly and openly about their aims and their achievements but also about the difficulties they faced and their laments at not having achieved more. We have tried to distil their advice to future holders of the office, advice which may have relevance beyond education. Indeed, there are lessons here for anyone starting a complex and demanding ministerial role.

**Finally, thank you to the FED for commissioning this brief paper and helping us track down our interviewees, and to Kirsche Vincent whose organisational genius enabled us to get the paper finished just in time.**

# Dramatis personae

For each Secretary of State there is a profile in Section Five below. Here at the outset, we have just listed them and their time in office to remind you of the cast list.

## Secretary of State for Education and Science

### 1. Kenneth Baker

**In office** 21 May 1986 - 24 July 1989

**Time in office** 3 years, 2 months & 3 days

### 2. John MacGregor

**In office** 24 July 1989 - 2 November 1990

**Time in office** 1 year, 3 months & 9 days

### 3. Kenneth Clarke

**In office** 2 November 1990 - 9 April 1992

**Time in office** 1 year, 5 months & 7 days

## Secretary of State for Education

### 4. John Patten

**In office** 10 April 1992 - 20 July 1994

**Time in office** 2 years, 3 months & 10 days

### 5. Gillian Shephard

**In office** 20 July 1994 - 5 July 1995

**Time in office** 350 days (continued below)

## Secretary of State for Employment

### 5. Gillian Shephard

**In office** (continued) 5 July 1995 - 1 May 1997

**Time in office** Total in both roles, 2 years, 9 months & 10 days

### 6. David Blunkett

**In office** 1 May 1997 - 8 June 2001

**Time in office** 4 years, 1 month & 7 days

#### Secretary of State for Education and Skills

##### 7. Estelle Morris

**In office** 8 June 2001 – 24 October 2002

**Time in office** 1 year, 4 months & 16 days

##### 8. Charles Clarke

**In office** 24 October 2002 – 15 December 2004

**Time in office** 2 years, 1 month & 21 days

##### 9. Ruth Kelly

**In office** 15 December 2004 – 5 May 2006

**Time in office** 1 year, 4 months & 20 days

##### 10. Alan Johnson

**In office** 5 May 2006 – 28 June 2007

**Time in office** 1 year, 1 month & 23 days

#### Secretary of State for Children, Families and Schools

##### 11. Ed Balls

**In office** 28 June 2007 – 12 May 2010

**Time in office** 2 years, 10 months & 14 days

#### Secretary of State for Education

##### 12. Michael Gove

**In office** 12 May 2010 – 15 July 2014

**Time in office** 4 years, 2 months & 3 days

##### 13. Nicky Morgan

**In office** 15 July 2014 – 13 July 2016

**Time in office** 1 year, 11 months & 28 days

##### 14. Justine Greening

**In office** 14 July 2016 – January 2018

**Time in office** 1 year, 5 months & 25 days

##### 15. Damian Hinds

**In office** 8 January 2018 – 24 July 2019

**Time in office** 1 year, 6 months & 16 days

##### 16. Gavin Williamson

**In office** 24 July 2019 – 15 September 2021

**Time in office** 2 years, 1 month & 21 days

##### 17. Nadhim Zahawi

**In office** 15 September 2021 – present

# Section 1: What were they like?



**At first sight the educational backgrounds of our Secretaries of State appear relatively narrow and unrepresentative, with only three being educated predominantly at mainstream comprehensives at the secondary level (Justine Greening, Gavin Williamson and Nadhim Zahawi). Two were educated at a single school, the private Nottingham Grammar (Ken Clarke and Ed Balls). Eight in all were educated privately. All our Secretaries of State, except Alan Johnson, went on to university where Oxbridge dominated with 10 out of the 16 studying there.**

But perhaps there is a little more diversity when you peer under the bonnet: two Education Secretaries attended religious schools, three went to grammar schools, and one a special school. The subjects studied at university include history, maths, modern languages, business studies (including an MBA) and law. And yes, of course, PPE was the most frequently studied course. Alas, there were no scientists amongst our group until Nadhim Zahawi, with a degree in chemical engineering, arrived in the post in 2021.

Few Secretaries of State had a professional interest or grounding in education prior to their appointment. Gillian Shephard had been a teacher and a school inspector. Estelle Morris taught in a comprehensive school and is the only Secretary of State for Education to have done so. David Blunkett gained a Postgraduate Certificate and taught at the further education level. Political experience of education was more common – Gove and Blunkett, our two longest serving ministers, shadowed the brief in opposition and brought with them knowledge of the sector and a clear agenda. Morris, Charles Clarke and Johnson had been junior ministers within the department before their appointment. Greening and Damian Hinds had both shown a strong interest in social mobility in Parliament. Greening suggested

she coined the phrase “levelling up” and Hinds served on the Education Select Committee.

The average tenure of the 16 Secretaries of State, who have completed their time in office, was not long. Eight had under two years in office, with the result that some came and went before they could have a significant impact. Only two, Gove and Blunkett, served for more than four years. It's not just standard reshuffles that can end a tenure; changes of Prime Minister, whether through general elections or the election of a new party leader, also pose a threat to having a good run at the role. During reshuffles, the PM may sometimes have had a purpose in mind (ensuring “grip” for example); at other times the movement of an Education Secretary appeared to lack rhyme or reason. (There's a whole book to be written about reshuffles, their motivations and their consequences).

Given this brevity of tenure, it's perhaps unsurprising that many Education Secretaries regretted, often bitterly, having so short a time in the role. Of course, some could see it coming, which focused the mind. For example, Shephard and Balls could each see that their respective party's long period of political dominance was coming to an end and that they would hit the election buffers. Ken Clarke regretted leaving health to become Education Secretary in the last gasp of the Thatcher administration but also regretted leaving education in 1992, even though it was to become Home Secretary. Some years later Charles Clarke was to follow this path to the Home Office with a similar sense of regret. The only one among the interviewees who welcomed a move away was Blunkett but that was not because he didn't like the role; it was because, including his spell in opposition, he'd been on the beat for seven years and thought it was time for a change, for the system as well as himself. Five Education Ministers in this period served before, through and after an election

– Baker, Kelly, Morgan, Greening and Williamson. Only Ken Clarke survived as the Education Minister when there was a change of PM without an election, which occurred four times during our period.

With education, the regrets about the short tenure in office were never just about ministers wanting to cling on. All those we interviewed had, or had developed, a passion for the subject, the role and the mission that belied any lack of previous interest. There was a desire to see through changes they had set in motion and, having got into their stride, to do so with a knowledge of their department and their brief. Many pleaded with the PM to stay; Greening even chose resignation rather than a move from the Cabinet portfolio she wanted to retain. To a person, they believed it had been an honour to have served in the role. They might not go all the way with Churchill's reflection on being PM in the War – “I loved every minute of it” – but they completely understood the sentiment.

The passion for the role and their commitment came through in another way too, with many making a significant contribution to education after their ministerial careers had ended. Baker set up a chain of 14-19 University Technical Colleges through the Baker-Dearing Trust, Shephard chaired the London Institute of Education's Governing Council and served on the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (before resigning in protest because she perceived a lack of progress). David Blunkett chaired the governing council of the University of Law. Morris took on numerous education-related roles within the university sector once she had left office and Charles Clarke has written extensively about education and campaigned for universities to become engines of social change. Greening cofounded the Social Mobility Pledge, persuading hundreds of businesses to sign up to a commitment to tackle the issue. In doing so, she continued the

aspect of her work that she felt most passionate about when in office. So ministers' impact can continue long after they have left the department; not just because of the momentum of reforms put in place but because of an enduring personal commitment that finds expression beyond politics.

There is also another way of thinking about our Education Secretaries: where do they sit on an axis of radical reformers or consolidators? It's not a pejorative assessment. At times, radical reform may be the right answer while at others, consolidation or refinement of what's being attempted may be the better approach. By contrast, indecision or excessive caution can be as problematic as permanent revolution.

There are, of course, lots of factors influencing the approach including the point in the political cycle, the agenda inherited from a predecessor, the priorities of the PM at the time and the personality of the holder of the office. Just consider the very different circumstances of Blunkett and Hinds: one is a minister in a new reforming government, backed by a huge parliamentary majority, where education is the top priority for the PM; the other features in a minority government overwhelmed by the challenges of Brexit and hoping to ensure it upsets teachers as little as possible.

**We see Baker, Ken Clarke, Blunkett, Gove and perhaps Patten (though he was unsuccessful) as the radical reformers who tried to shake up the system. MacGregor, Morris, Johnson, Morgan, and Hinds largely tried to calm things down and consolidate. Shephard, Charles Clarke, Kelly, Balls, Greening and Williamson displayed elements of both approaches. It's an important lens for viewing our Secretaries of State and we'll come back to it.**

## Key facts

### Gender

Women	5	Men	12
-------	---	-----	----

### Time in office (not including Nadhim Zahawi)

Under one year	0	One to two years	8
Two to three years	5	Three to four years	1
Four + years	2		

### Appointed following:

Reshuffle	9	Resignation	1
Post-election/new leader reshuffle	7		

### First Cabinet post?

Yes	9	No	8
-----	---	----	---

### Held brief in opposition?

Yes	2 (Blunkett, Gove)	No	15
-----	--------------------	----	----

### Prime Minister?

Thatcher	5 in total, (3 since the 1988 start for this publication)
Major	3 (Ken Clarke overlapped Thatcher and Major)
Blair	5
Brown	1
Cameron	2
May	2
Johnson	2

### Political Party?

Conservative	11*	Labour	6
--------------	-----	--------	---

\*In the coalition government under Cameron, the Liberal Democrats had junior ministers in the Department

### Approach (too early to include Nadhim Zahawi)

Stirred things up Baker, Blunkett, Ken Clarke, Gove, Patten	5
Calmed things down MacGregor, Johnson, Morgan, Morris, Hinds	5
Both Shephard, Charles Clarke, Balls, Greening, Kelly, Williamson	6

# Section 2: What were the challenges of office?

Whatever the background, experience and outlook of our Secretaries of State, once in office, the challenges they faced were remarkably similar. First, they all had to deal with the strong tendency among parts of the education world to see government, and therefore the Secretary of State above all, as a threat to be fended off. Ironically, this tendency thinks as Ronald Reagan did, that government is the problem. If there were a one sentence summary of what this element wants it would be: "Give us the money and get out of the way". Freedom, from this perspective, simply means freedom from government. Paradoxically, though, as soon as a major problem is identified - underperformance in certain places or a teacher shortage, for example - this same tendency demands: "What's the government going to do about it?" It does so without the faintest recognition of the blatant contradiction.

It is worth pointing out this contradiction at the outset because it poses a dilemma faced by every Secretary of State - even if they aim to please the education stakeholder community, it's difficult to do so fully because a large chunk of it has this contradictory view of the world. You are damned if you act ("get out of the way") and damned if you don't ("what's the government going to do about it?") and in any case resources ("give us the money") are inevitably constrained, even at the best of times. In these circumstances the skills involved in supporting, challenging and seeking to inspire the profession are of a very high order - and one selective piece of negative reporting can set you back.

Meanwhile inside government itself, the Secretary of State needs to convince the PM and Downing Street that they and the department have "got a grip". The Chancellor and the Treasury need to be convinced that value for money is being delivered, given the substantial investment made in education (even when it was less than a Secretary of State hoped for, which is most of the time). Then when genuine problems arise out of

the blue, inevitable Treasury scepticism about further funding must be faced, as when Gavin Williamson sought funding for catch-up activity as we came out of the pandemic. After all, if Treasury provides funds out-of-cycle to dig Education out of a hole, might they not have to do the same for colleagues at the Home Office, Health, Defence, Justice, Environment (delete as appropriate)?

A further challenge is the sheer breadth of the department. It has varied over the decades, always including pre-school and schools (more than 22,000 of them educating eight million pupils) and further education, mostly but not always including higher education and, under Shephard and Blunkett, including all these and employment. In Baker's time, it embraced science too. Later, under Balls, it included all children's services and a cross-government role on all policy affecting children but lost universities.

Even when its scope has been most limited, the breadth and depth means that the Secretary of State alone cannot be on top of everything. The devil really is in the detail and there simply aren't enough hours in the day. Inevitably, the chief focus is the school system, given its political salience (which, by the way, has grown dramatically over the last 30 years) but the single biggest regret of many Secretaries of State was not doing more to address skills. Many tried limited reforms but somehow the issue never got the attention it required to resolve the educational and political issues associated with fundamental reform. Williamson, uniquely, gave skills and FE top priority from the moment he was appointed by the PM through to his last day in office. By then he had ensured that the PM and the Chancellor were strong advocates of the skills agenda. We can expect his successor, Nadhim Zahawi, to build on the progress made.

As all these aspects of the role are thought through - and none can be neglected - there are swathes of policy (speeches, regulations, green papers, white papers and legislation) making their way through the departmental policy mill. Then there is the endless cycle of big moments - GCSE results, A Level results, the start of the school year - to handle, not to mention the daily media grind (with the ever-present risk of a blunder).

Don't forget either all the "events, dear boy, events" demanding immediate comment or action or both. Often these emerge from the obscure reaches of the department, which have had little or no ministerial oversight but then provoke concern amongst the public, parents and the media. Occasionally, they are totally overwhelming as in the case of the pandemic which inevitably dominated Williamson's time in office. Then there are Education Questions to deal with in Parliament. (Morris once got stuck in a departmental lift on the way to answer them).

All this is going on while, day after day, ministers stagger from one meeting to another, hoping always to appear fully focused and unfailingly polite, even when, as sometimes happens, a stakeholder, who finally has their moment in the sun, drones on and on. Your reputation depends too on managing this endless series of daily interactions - do you unfailingly remember to say "hello" to the security people at the entrance? When you run into someone who only days earlier was in your office do you remember their name? Do you say "thank you" for the tired sandwich provided by your private office at a moment of stress? Becoming Secretary of State is hard enough, succeeding in the role harder still. And we haven't even mentioned frontline visits (which ministers without fail enjoy and learn from) or the endless pressures of constituency business.

As the former Secretaries of State, without exception, said in the interviews, however demanding it may be at

times, it's a privilege and an honour to serve in the role. If you are generally sceptical about the politicians who have shaped our education system in recent decades, we might suggest that at the very least, along with Mick Jagger, you have some sympathy for the devil. All those we interviewed were hardworking committed people, doing their best to get through the day in one piece while also improving the education system. We can argue about the extent of each of their contributions but, for whatever reason, the system is significantly better now than it was 30 or 40 years ago. It's hard to argue that this progress had nothing at all to do with the seventeen holders of this great office.



# Section 3: What did they learn?

We asked our interviewees what advice they would have for their successors. The answers, synthesised below, were rich and diverse.

## 1. Quickly resolve inherited issues and make space for your own agenda

**Given the brevity of tenure and the pressures of office, it can hardly be a surprise if an incoming Secretary of State seems to be a person in a hurry, perhaps all the while looking over their shoulder for reassurance from No10. It's not surprising either that the longest serving Secretaries of State in our period (Gove, Blunkett, Balls and Shephard in order of length of service) each had the strongest relationships with the PM of the time and a significant impact.**

While in opposition, Blunkett had worked closely with Tony Blair to design New Labour's education policy (which given Blair's famous "Education, Education, Education" speech was a top priority for the whole of government). Blunkett believed that having a PM so strongly committed to education provided a transformational opportunity and was determined to seize it. He went out of his way to keep Blair and No10 fully informed and engaged. Much the same applied to Gove who was close to Cameron before 2010 and for most of the first term. Balls, meanwhile, was entrusted by Gordon Brown to deliver the "children and families" agenda, one of the centre pieces of his new government. Shephard and John Major had a strong relationship (as Major put it, "Don't mess with our Gill"). He trusted her to calm things down after a period of educational turmoil while crucially securing, rather than watering down, the radical reforms that others had begun. But to survive and prosper in the role and to have this type of impact requires difficult matters to be despatched along the way, often from day one.

Ken Clarke advised his successors not to allow officials to rush them into making decisions on the immediate issues waiting in the inherited in-tray. The officials may be good but sometimes they have an agenda, he said, and it's the minister's job to exercise judgement and make decisions. Good advice surely; but as others pointed out, sometimes major difficulties are inherited from an immediate predecessor, which may have contributed to their demise. In these circumstances, it is important to resolve the problems as rapidly as possible; the longer-term agenda cannot be pursued successfully without doing so. As Morris put it, simultaneously you need to adeptly manage both the political and the educational agendas. Your room for manoeuvre with Downing Street will increase, as will your longevity, if you succeed.

Baker's first task was to end, once and for all, the conflict with teacher unions over pay. By setting up an independent Pay Review Body (initially the Interim Advisory Committee) he effectively depoliticised industrial relations, which for at least three years prior to Baker's appointment, had been such a dominant theme for both the department and the Secretary of State. After inheriting multiple challenges from Patten, Shephard methodically and skilfully resolved them. Charles Clarke had to attend immediately to inherited controversies over public exams and student finance. His advice was not to postpone difficult issues but face them as rapidly as possible.

Kelly found the Tomlinson review of 14-19 qualifications in her in-tray when she arrived. She knew the PM and his head of policy, Andrew Adonis, were sceptical about replacing A Levels, especially as a general election was probably only months away, so decided to only implement very limited aspects of it. Johnson, her successor, had to take action to sort out the row he inherited from her over List 99, the register of those banned from working with children. In the run-up to the

2015 election, Lynton Crosby wanted “the barnacles scraped from the bottom of the boat” and the hostility of the teaching profession to the government was one of them. So Gove was reshuffled and became Chief Whip and Nicky Morgan was explicitly asked by the PM to improve (and quieten down) relations with teachers, strained as they were, given the scale of change Gove had driven through. She did so without backtracking on the fundamental elements of Gove’s reforms.

If smoother waters can be found, the key to making progress then is for the Secretary of State to be clear about what their priorities will be. It might sound obvious but if you’ve just been catapulted into the role without having previously given it serious thought – as, for example, Kelly, Morgan or Hinds – it’s an immediate and pressing challenge which leads to point 2.

## 2. Fashion a clear agenda and get on with it

**For the Secretaries of State who had held the education brief in opposition – Blunkett and Gove – the agenda was clear. They owned it personally as well as politically, they were firmly backed by the PM (and a winning manifesto) and, as a result, they were able to advance their cause with vigour, pace and energy. Blunkett and Gove were both well-aware that their party had been out of power for over a decade when they took over and this brought added expectation; there was pressure to act (and to be seen to act) rapidly. In both cases they were talented politicians who had used their time in opposition to think carefully about how to operate as well as what to do.**

They built loyal teams around them and made sure their relationship with the PM was consistently nurtured. Neither was universally popular, of course, but both stayed in post for four years and both made a major impact on the standards and structures of the school system.

Balls took on the role as a new PM, Gordon Brown, came into office. Brown’s team, before he became PM, had worked up a new approach not just to education but to what became known as the “children’s agenda”. Children’s social care was moved from Health into Education and Balls was given a cross-government role in relation to overall children’s policy including, for example, tackling child poverty and youth justice. So, not unlike Blunkett and Gove, Balls had a substantial agenda from day one and the prospect of a decent spell in office. When the financial crisis engulfed the Brown premiership, Balls, as an economist and close friend of Brown’s, might have been expected to become distracted. But, sometimes perhaps to the annoyance of the PM, he consciously stuck to his brief with focus and determination. One of Balls’s biggest regrets was not being able to convince his successor of the importance of continuing the wider agenda.

Baker’s period as Secretary of State started with the then PM, Margaret Thatcher, telling him to take his time (though only a month), to read around the subject and decide what he wanted to do. His period in office straddled the 1987 election and with education featuring extensively in the election manifesto, after it he had a clear agenda and mandate for radical reform. That gave him momentum and created a drive within the department amongst previously sceptical officials.

For many of the others, the mission was far less clear at the outset. Some such as MacGregor, Johnson, Morgan and Hinds had been appointed with a brief to simply calm things down and, if possible, keep things moving. For Charles Clarke, education was his first Secretary of State appointment (although he had been in the Cabinet as party chairman) and was determined to make his mark. He urged his successors to be clear, as soon as possible, about their mission and act with urgency, especially if the mission might include controversial reforms. In his case the most challenging reform, successfully delivered, was not a school reform

but the introduction of tuition fees for university students. It was a reform that his predecessor had balked, and which proved to be extremely controversial both inside government and beyond, but in the long run proved fundamentally beneficial to the university sector.

But Ministers often have room to set their own personal agenda, above and beyond the government’s. Famously, long before our Seventeen, the great R A Butler arrived at the department in 1941 having been made President of the Board of Education at the age of 38. The Permanent Secretary asked him, somewhat sceptically – you can imagine the arched eyebrow – what he planned to do, given it was wartime and Churchill wanted him to avoid controversy at all costs; Butler replied that he might tour the country for a while making speeches. The Permanent Secretary was unimpressed and put him down with the marvellous reply: “But Mr Butler, there is only one speech.”

Soon enough though Butler got his head round the preparations already underway in the department for post-War reconstruction and realised he could do something truly transformative by legislating for secondary education for all. This was very much his initiative. In fact, Churchill insofar as he thought about education at all, was opposed to any education reform at all during the War. He remembered the unholy controversy in 1902 over the Education Act, particularly the suggestion that funding Catholic Schools would amount to “Rome on the rates”. Churchill reluctantly but decisively came on board once Butler’s plans were well-advanced.

Morgan used the summer after her appointment to read into the subject and develop a mission – beyond calming things down – around children’s character and its development. Greening was a powerful advocate of social mobility before she became Secretary of State

and wanted that to become her driving mission. Kelly, appointed just before Christmas 2004, had time to reflect over the break and personally drafted her first major speech for early January. She became wedded to the idea of extending parental choice and school diversity but within the context of a supportive local government framework. Despite the controversy caused by her proposals, and the tension with Downing Street who wanted further school autonomy, Kelly also fashioned an agenda of opening up school buildings to use out of hours that became known as “Kelly Hours”.

Johnson, given his extraordinary upbringing (which demonstrated that people overcome even the most challenging of childhoods and succeed in life) had strong feelings. In his moving memoir, *This Boy*, Johnson wrote that he was “deeply unhappy” at secondary school and “hated the journey, the teachers, the lessons.” But he didn’t allow this searing experience to prejudice him against the system. Instead, it motivated him to prioritise improving things for those students who found the odds stacked against them. He therefore gave strong emphasis to raising the education leaving age to 17 and then 18 – impacting the so-called NEETs (young people not in education, employment or training). He also took as a moral imperative the need to do something about the catastrophic education performance of children in care. It was a substantial achievement for the shortest serving of our Secretaries of State. Nadhim Zahawi began his tenure with a paean to teachers, recalling his arrival as an immigrant from Iraq and attributing his progress since then to his wonderful teachers.

Sometimes the best thing that can be done is to embrace an agenda already set by your predecessor. It bedevils policy and breeds cynicism if each incoming Secretary of State feels the need to impose their own personal stamp on everything. Ken Clarke quickly

realised that, under his predecessor, the Baker reforms were being diluted at best and frustrated at worst. With a ready-made reform agenda which he didn't need to reinvent, he understood his role was to ensure implementation and overcome resistance. In the mid-1990s, Shephard carefully took the Baker and post-Baker reforms - National Curriculum, national testing, Ofsted, devolution of budgets to schools, grant-maintained status and a determination to tackle failing schools - and made them irreversible. Her experience of having been a local authority school inspector helped her realise what it would take to embed these changes and make them work in practice.

Blunkett, in turn, though Secretary of State in a new government with a new PM, built on Shephard's work rather than overturning it. Controversially he kept Chris Woodhead (whom both he and Shephard had inherited from Patten) as Chief Inspector of Schools. Blunkett's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies drew heavily on the pilots that Shephard had started; the leaders of them, whom she had appointed - John Stannard and Anita Straker - were kept in post (and performed brilliantly). Shephard and Blunkett spoke in our interviews with a genuine and deep respect for each other. Shephard actively prepared the way for Blunkett, elevating their shared commitment to the school system over party politics. Although they were from different parties, it was perhaps the most collaborative relationship of any among our Secretaries of State.

Years later, Morgan described how she didn't retract any of Gove's reforms; rather she carried them on while "making less noise". In fact, post the 2015 election she was keen to accelerate the academy programme to all schools. It was George Osborne and David Cameron who held her back when the level of opposition from Conservative shires, worried about the sustainability of village schools, became clear. Previously, Charles Clarke

had picked up the London Challenge, which had roots in Excellence in Cities, and ensured its success. Greening was explicit in her view that Secretaries of State place too much emphasis on doing new things; her advice was to look at what's working locally and apply that more broadly because that is likely to have the maximum impact.

But whatever agenda the Secretary of State sets out to pursue, they can't do it alone. Hence point 3.

### 3. Line up departmental support

**The Department for Education (DfE) and its predecessors through history have a mixed reputation. In the 1930s one minister scathingly referred to it as "an outpost of the Treasury" while Baker, on being moved to Education in 1986 from the Department of the Environment, used a football metaphor. It was, he said, like moving from the manager's job at Arsenal to Charlton: "You crossed the river and went down two divisions." (At that time the department was located south of the river, next door to Waterloo Station).**

Since that time the department's status has undoubtedly risen, but its performance has been uneven and relations between ministers and officials have varied. All our interviewees realised the significance of this relationship, but they expressed differing views of what was needed to make it work. The variation related in part to personality but in part also to the specific time they were in office.

Ken Clarke found officials generally too cautious about upsetting apple carts. He also found working relationships with the civil servants at Education the most difficult of his career in terms of delivering what he wanted. Baker, by contrast, felt well-served, certainly once he had found the civil servants (often not at the

most senior level) with the necessary talent and the enthusiasm for driving his agenda forward. He knew he owed a lot to Nick Stuart, his Deputy Secretary for Schools.

Blunkett found that the department took time to adjust to the sheer scope and ambition of what he intended. However, before the May 1997 election he had already built a strong and enduring relationship with Michael Bichard, the Permanent Secretary, who played a decisive part in the smooth transition from Shephard to Blunkett. (This was when Michael Barber arrived in the department to oversee implementation of the school standards reforms and to bring into the heart of the department, people with experience in schools and local authorities. Bichard was unerringly supportive of Barber throughout). Even so, significant changes were required in the first year, including the appointment of a new Director General of Schools.

The other key to Blunkett's effectiveness in the department was that he actively built his ministerial team, as a team. They had regular weekly meetings (which included the special advisers) and, in a typical Blunkett personal touch, his ministers were always invited to join him for a cup of tea on their birthdays. (This is a good example of a vital lesson in politics: if you want to get big things done, make sure you take care of the small things). Others too worked on team building but few as assiduously as Blunkett. Morris found that the excellent team of advisers Blunkett had put together in the first term had moved to other roles at the start of the second. (This was when Michael Barber moved to No10). These departures were a setback for her. In retrospect she accepts that she was too slow to build a new team around her, partly because she had been surprised to hold her seat at the election and even more surprised to be offered the top position in Education. Bichard had moved on too so her Permanent Secretary, David Normington, was also new. As he had

been promoted from Director General of Schools, he inevitably left a gap in that crucial position.

Gove, with a bold agenda, found as Blunkett had, that the department needed to adjust significantly to an incoming administration. Within a year or so there was a change of Permanent Secretary - errors in a published list of school building projects to be cancelled, among other things, caused tension with the department. Gove was also prepared to use his political advisers, including Dominic Cummings, as outriders for his reforms.

Morgan worked hard at and enjoyed her relationships with officials, including her Permanent Secretary, Chris Wormald. Kelly, by contrast, preferred to depend on her excellent special advisers and wondered whether she had overdone that at the expense of her officials. Greening wanted the department aligned behind her vision on social exclusion so addressed all London staff on day one. She was proud of her background as an accountant and sought to oversee the department as a CEO in a business might, occasionally causing tension with officials who thought she was advancing onto their territory. She managed by exception - wanting to know about projects that were not on track so she could intervene. She expected officials to notify her early if problems arose but where progress was being made, they were given substantial leeway. Hinds was full of praise for the support he received from officials as he led the department through the challenges of a government overwhelmed by Brexit. Nevertheless, he still felt obliged to issue a rare Ministerial Directive, effectively determining that T Levels should proceed against the official advice that they should be delayed. He had the personal qualities to take this controversial step without damaging relations with the department.

A strong ministerial team is also important because the span of responsibility in the department is broad. Secretaries of State benefit from investing time in the



ministerial team around them. Where they are aligned and the junior ministers can be trusted, so much more gets done. Shephard trusted Robin Squire to lead for her through the Hackney Downs controversy. Blunkett actively involved Stephen Byers and Morris in the wide-ranging school standards agenda. Alan Johnson, as Higher Education Minister, was a vital ally for Charles Clarke in driving through the controversial introduction of tuition fees. Similarly, David Miliband served Charles Clarke well on School Standards, Andrew Adonis supported successive Secretaries of State on schools and Gove gave Nick Gibb plenty of scope and responsibility for toughening testing and exam standards. Gibb continued to serve in the department for a total of 11 years. Williamson, however, found that he was without a junior minister covering skills until the gap was filled in February 2020.

Shephard, who had good productive working relationships with departmental officials, made the obvious but vital further point. Ministers must always remember that, however good the working relationships are within it, the department itself doesn't teach a single child, which leads to point 4.

#### 4. Ensure the delivery chain is in good working order

**With overall responsibility for over 22,000 schools, an effective delivery chain is needed to connect the department to teachers and children in every far-flung corner of the country. To influence what nine million children and young people learn means influencing, to put it plainly, what over 400,000 teachers do all day. That requires making sure, as far as possible, that everyone at every level in the system understands the mission, knows the priorities and has the skills and capacity to act effectively. And that in turn depends ultimately on the ability of the Secretary of State, with**

**the department's support, to communicate well, to build effective and strong relationships with teachers, headteachers, school governors and local authorities. It requires a sustained combination of pressure at each level to provide support to enable delivery.**

Systematic, consistent and effective communication – in both directions – is crucial but never easy. There needs to be understanding at the top about how the decisions will translate into action and resultant change on the ground. Numerous initiatives over the decades have failed because they were insufficiently thought-through or not acted on with sufficient rigour; they were more in the category of “announce and hope for the best.” Blunkett knew he had to mobilise the machine to get behind his reforms. It was a key part of Michael Barber's job to make sure that got done. Similarly, Balls was systematic about communicating the new priorities of the department.

Among the Seventeen there were those who saw it as an explicit part of their mission to challenge the teaching profession, to criticise failure where they saw it and to push the system to do better – Ken Clarke, Patten, Shephard, Blunkett and Gove among them. If, while taking this approach, there are significant failures of implementation, as with Patten's KS3 English Tests in 1992-3, then this can be the road to disaster. If, on the other hand, it is combined with support and investment it can work, as Shephard and Blunkett demonstrated. Gove was operating in more financially constrained times but believes that his message was rather more nuanced than sometimes portrayed. His view was that teaching was better than ever before but needed to improve still further. As he drove through controversial reforms, many of the teaching profession simply heard the second part and responded accordingly.

In contrast to this first group, as we've seen there were some among the Seventeen for whom the priority was to calm things down. This is an easier task, especially if you succeed a controversial reformer and therefore benefit from the contrast. Playing this role well can be the key to securing the implementation of important reforms. It is much more sophisticated than simply compromising in search of a quieter life; you need to decide, perhaps behind the scenes, what the non-negotiables are and see them through. It is often about tone as well as substance.

It has its risks too, though, the greatest of which is that the sighs of relief among teachers result in slippage of rigour or standards. At times during the political cycle there is perhaps little other option – Johnson, Morgan, Greening and Hinds would testify to that. But even where the priority is to calm things down, some ministers still pursued important reforms at the same time – Johnson on children in care, Morgan and Greening on Relationship, Sex and Health Education and Hinds on teacher workload.

Nevertheless, the truth is that if ministers want major change, there is little choice but to challenge teachers, or at least some teachers, and that is bound to generate opposition. Then the question is what language you use, what case you make and how effectively you pick and fight your battles.

A manifesto commitment helps. For example, Baker, whose agenda was the most radical of all, generated massive opposition – almost all of around 11,000 responses to his consultation on the establishment of a National Curriculum were opposed to the idea – but, as he has always said, he had an electoral mandate. He had ensured that the idea of a National Curriculum was firmly in the 1987 Conservative election manifesto, along with the rest of what became the 1988 Great Education Reform Act. Similarly, Blunkett and Gove were also acting on explicit manifesto commitments.

These are crucial; they ensure support from the PM and the Cabinet and at least acquiescence in Parliament. They also strengthen the Secretary of State's hand in negotiations with the Treasury. By contrast, a radical change which doesn't have an explicit manifesto commitment to build on (such as the 2004 change in tuition fees) can easily become divisive within the governing party and controversial far beyond it.

Shephard, Charles Clarke and Balls represent a middle way; neither confrontation, nor calming down. They each strove to maintain a strong, effective and sometimes trusting dialogue with the profession while advancing significant reforms. Through private dialogue, Shephard enabled the NUT leadership to back out of the cul-de-sac of ongoing test boycott with its honour pretty much intact. She did so while simultaneously ensuring the effective implementation of a regular cycle of Ofsted inspections and the publication of league tables of both primary and secondary school results. No mean feat.

Charles Clarke, ably assisted by his Minister of State, David Miliband, built a social partnership with the teacher unions (though the NUT chose not to participate) which gave their leaders a significant place at the policy table and enabled a continuous dialogue about workload and bureaucracy. At the same time, he advanced the London Challenge, continued the academies policy and opened up the prospect of major examination reform (which in the end didn't happen because of his sudden promotion in December 2004). He saw managing stakeholders as an important part of his role and invested significant amount of time in doing so. Kelly pursued different priorities but some stakeholders felt neglected during her tenure, given the contrast between her and her predecessor, Charles Clarke. Kelly herself would never make excuses but, as a mother with young children while in office, you might have expected the profession to cut her a little slack.

## 5. Manage key political relationships and communications

**In addition to influencing the department and the delivery chain, any good Secretary of State must also invest in and manage the political relationships on which success depends.**

There are essentially only three ways for a Secretary of State to relate to the PM and No10. The first is to kowtow to them, wait for instructions and do what they say, and while it might appeal at first sight to some Secretaries of State in some circumstances, it has significant risks attached. One is that, however well-informed the PM or the No10 education advisers might be, they do not have access to all the information available to the Secretary of State and the department and, therefore, might err on the shallow side. The headlines might be more influential than the facts. Another, given the inevitable and continuous swirl in No10, is that an education issue needing attention may not get the priority the Secretary of State knows it needs; in such situations long delay or inconsistent thinking are both possible. Yet another risk is that there may not be a coherent No10 view; there may be competing or even contradictory views behind the famous front door. All too often when someone says "No10 thinks", they don't really know what the PM thinks. And by simply taking orders the Secretary of State begins to look weak inside and outside government, with damaging consequences for their career and for the department.

To avoid these downsides, some Secretaries of State shift to the opposite pole and in effect say: "You appointed me, I know what you want, leave me to get on with it and I'll come to you if I need anything." This has its appeal to a confident politician and is sometimes seen as the ideal by education

stakeholders who tend to be suspicious of "No10 interference." For much of the 150 years since 1870 this option was the default. It worked for Fisher under Lloyd George and for Thatcher under Ted Heath, for example. It also tended to be the way Ken Clarke operated, albeit with a licence to operate from Major.

But it too has downsides. Ever since James Callaghan's famous Ruskin speech in 1976, PMs have taken an ever-closer interest in education. Much of the time this close interest is an asset, not least when spending reviews come round. Moreover, given the nature of the modern media it is essential that government communication is coordinated from the centre, otherwise chaos is inevitable. That means the PM at PMQs or during a press conference needs to know, understand and support the Minister's agenda. That will be much better served by direct dialogue between the PM and the Secretary of State rather than merely an exchange of notes between officials or political advisers.

And, by the way, if the only time Ministers choose to talk to No10 is when they have run into trouble, they can expect short shrift and a damaged reputation inside and outside the government. In any case, to state an obvious (but oddly rarely made) point, there is only one government at a time and the PM and Secretary of State are both part of it. So, as Monty Python might have put it, maybe there is only one thing worse than attention from No10 and that is a lack of it?

Which leaves the third option. Agree the agenda, make explicit how the relationships will work and build into the PM's diary and the Secretary of State's periodic routine updates of progress. Make clear the ground rules for the No10 Education Adviser to adhere to - such as regular meetings with the departmental special advisers and the ministerial team, and planned meetings with the Secretary of State. More important

still, the Secretary of State should have regular, even if brief, one-to-ones with the PM - before or after Cabinet, for example, or a brief phone call to Chequers at the weekend. Make sure these meetings, however difficult the problems might be, are constructive. Remember Margaret Thatcher's complimentary remark about (Lord) David Young: "The others bring me problems, he brings me solutions." After all, PMs have enough to worry about without an uncooperative or uncommunicative minister adding to the burden. You want the PM to look forward to meeting you rather than rolling their eyes at the prospect.

Shephard managed this relationship well in the twilight of the Major government. Blunkett, in a new government which prioritised education, was a master of active engagement with No10. Until 2014, Gove's relationship with Cameron's No10 was similarly productive though Cameron took far less interest in the detail than Blair had done. Kelly, by contrast, felt she had under-invested in the relationship at some cost to her. For others it was a continuous wrestle. Although they were generally well-aligned, there were tensions between Baker and Thatcher over the content of the National Curriculum. Morris's instincts on education reform were somewhat out of kilter with Downing Street and she never fully resolved with them the issues at stake. Right from the start, Greening did not see eye to eye with PM Theresa May or her advisers on reintroducing grammar schools. The issue was not mentioned at the initial meeting when Greening was offered the role by Theresa May, but she was quickly told afterwards by Nick Timothy, No10's most influential policy adviser, that grammar schools were indeed a priority for her.

The ideal for making progress is when the Secretary of State assembles what John Kotter characterises as "a guiding coalition". This requires building effective relationships with the seven to ten people across

government upon whom the Secretary of State depends on most to get the job done. Who exactly they are will vary from time to time but they are likely to include the relevant Minister of State, the Permanent Secretary, a relevant Director General, a special adviser, the No10 Education Adviser and perhaps a key Treasury official or a Chief Inspector of Schools as well as the PM. If these people know exactly what the Minister wants and are motivated and inspired to play their part, the ability to move with pace and direction will be greatly enhanced and success much more likely.

Charles Clarke was explicit about the importance of this guiding coalition and at Education he felt he had it in place (with the exception of the Treasury); later at the Home Office he accepts it was absent which made his time there more difficult. Sometimes it takes time to get these people in place as Ken Clarke discovered, experiencing more resistance from his officials at Education than in any other department. But he had a good private office, the full support of the PM, and in Tessa Keswick, an able special adviser who was instrumental in the introduction of Ofsted. Blunkett had a powerful team of advisers, such as Conor Ryan, who had excellent relations with No10. They were vital to his success, but he reflected that he'd sometimes been less successful at taking Cabinet colleagues with him.

Beyond the guiding coalition, the Secretary of State makes or influences a significant number of appointments - chairs, chief executives and board members of agencies and pivotal figures such as the Chief Inspector of Schools. These need careful thought as much of what needs to be done depends on the people appointed to these roles. The temptation is to appoint people the minister knows or has previously worked with. A further temptation is to take party political considerations into account. But the sage advice is to prioritise competence and integrity



above everything, because in the end, ministers are judged by the impact they have. Trusted, competent people are much more likely to deliver; if they are sympathetic to the governing party sobeit, but that is not the point.

It is also worth remembering who it is out there, beyond party politics, that needs to be influenced; the credibility of appointees with stakeholders should also be a consideration. These figures need access from time to time to the Secretary of State, without officials blocking their channels to him or her. (To illustrate this with an absurd example, the head of the National Curriculum Council in the late 1980s, Duncan Graham, discovered at one point that the only way he could get to see Baker without officials present was to meet him in a field in North Wales). In the end, the golden rule of appointments is that the politics of performance should trump the politics of patronage.

No10 is important in this respect. PMs vary in their degree of interest in such appointments though they are always interested in, and sometimes have a formal responsibility for, top posts, such as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector. When a proposal for an appointment to a top post is sent to No10, the Secretary of State should ensure they have briefed the PM personally and ideally secured his or her support in advance of submitting it. Otherwise, there is a risk that No10 rather than the PM will decide whether the proposed candidate is appropriate, perhaps without all the information they should have.

Beyond Whitehall, visits to the frontline are vital to understanding the system and in checking up on the impact of various policies. All the holders of this office agreed this was vital, even though it is always a struggle to find the time. Morgan was assiduous in visiting schools to see what was going on in the staff room. She used that experience in Cabinet discussions. Her focus on prioritising excellence for all was

strengthened after a few school visits had suggested to her that progress for some children was inadequate. The constituency, of course, can be a critical source of feedback but relying on it alone is likely to distort the view. (While out walking in his beloved constituency, Sheffield Brightside, David Blunkett heard a young lad call out: "Are you the one that wants us to do more homework?" "Yes"; "And eat less chips?" "Yes." "Miserable b\*\*\*\*\* aren't you?")

Bluntly, Secretaries of State should get out more! It is easy for the diary secretary to clog up the whole week with meetings which fill the diary. Meanwhile media engagements should be made consciously and selectively as far as possible, while ensuring consistency and clarity of message is vital. Headline messages need to be clear at any given moment and refined as the agenda moves forward. It is important not to fall into the trap of constantly announcing random "initiatives"; that leads to confusion rather than impact. Clear articulation of purpose is vital to every stakeholder group and responsibility for that rests squarely with the Secretary of State. This is what Gove described as being clear about moral purpose and trying to ensure that everything being done fits into that vision. Easy to say, hard to do.

Ministers also need to be aware of the stakeholders that might not be obvious. No easy task given that, as Hinds told us, there are more, and more varied, stakeholders in education than any other department he's worked in. For example, Secretaries of State through the ages have discovered that it's quite easy, albeit unintentionally, to upset a lot of bishops. Jamie Oliver suddenly put the quality of school meals on Morris's agenda and Marcus Rashford was simultaneously able to score goals and corner Williamson. With issues like these coming apparently from nowhere, the minister needs to be careful about the initial response; better to pause and think, even

under pressure, than rush into a rash statement. It's the first response that is likely to have the greatest public impact and any correction later will either be drowned out or lead to condemnation. The classic condemnation if you make a factual error is "he/she is a liar; if not, he/she is incompetent".

Over and above all these considerations, backbenchers need attention, even if they are politically sympathetic and broadly supportive; they hate being taken for granted and seen merely as lobby fodder. Shephard assiduously built links to Conservative backbench committees. Not only could they tell her what was being said, they could help her communicate her priorities. Kelly accepted that she focused too much on making policy and not enough on explaining the merits of reform to backbench colleagues. Johnson was caught out by a swift backbench rebellion after deft lobbying from the Catholic Church put paid to his plans for religious schools to widen their intake. Also, it's never clear which backbencher might one day be a ministerial colleague. Attlee's dictum is distilled wisdom; "if you are going to negotiate with someone tomorrow, don't insult him today."

Just listing the stakeholders is exhausting. Imagine finding time for all of them in the ministerial diary, the subject of the next section.

## 6. Making good use of time increases impact

**Oscar Wilde famously said: "Socialism will never come because there aren't enough evenings in the week." The thought applies to all political change, not just socialism, not least because each change in education policy requires regular interaction with the numerous stakeholders discussed in previous sections. Unless the Secretary of State is disciplined about the use of time, there simply won't be enough hours in the day to get the job done. Some years ago,**

**an education minister confessed that he had to work 50 hours a week to keep the system ticking over; if he actually wanted to radically change things, which he did, it meant another 25 hours a week on top of that.**

That's why signalling intent through symbolic action is so important: it can quickly and effectively communicate priorities that might otherwise take months or even years to be understood. Symbolic moments arise when a Secretary of State makes plain where they stand on a major issue, where they draw the metaphorical line in the sand. Seizing these moments boldly and decisively can help them make their mark.

For Shephard the intervention in Hackney Downs was one such moment - the first ever closure by central government of an individual school on the grounds that its standards were intolerable. Blunkett built on this in his first month on office, publishing a list of 21 schools whose performance was unacceptable. For Balls the symbolic moment was the intervention in Haringey's Children's Services. For Gove it was early action on exam standards and the rapid expansion of the academy programme. The controversy surrounding these symbolic moments can be welcome to the Secretary of State because they help to establish their profile and priorities amid all the noise. They also create dividing lines with critics and the opposition - the key being to get the lines in the right place. They get noticed by the PM too. When Baker announced on television that he planned to introduce a National Curriculum, without informing the PM in advance, he received a congratulatory note from Margaret Thatcher: "Kenneth, never underestimate the power of simply just announcing something." However, such moments inevitably also generate cynicism unless the press releases and statements are followed through with sustained action.

Most of the Secretaries of State acknowledged the immense pressure on their time. On reflection, Balls believed that the foundation of a new department, with a new structure and culture, had made huge demands on his time that might have been better used on other activities. A few basics make all the difference; there is no substitute for single-minded prioritisation. For Charles Clarke that amounted to focusing on the most salient issues – tuition fees in particular – with the rest being left to officials or the ministerial team. But that does rather assume the other ministers and officials are able to take the strain. Charles Clarke, as we have seen, had exceptionally able ministers of state in David Miliband and Alan Johnson. Hinds really wanted to concentrate on three or four priorities but accepted it just wasn't possible in his time in office, given the extreme political volatility of the May premiership.

Prioritisation also needs to be backed by a culture in which officials and colleagues feel able to raise problems before they become crises. A problem promptly managed and resolved is much less time-consuming and energy-draining than a full-blown crisis. Greening was explicit in demanding that difficult issues be quickly elevated to the level at which they could be resolved. That meant she could spend her time on emerging problems while applying a much lighter touch where progress was being made. Hinds's strong relationship with officials led to an openness about difficult issues. Without that approach, problems such as List 99 in Kelly's time can become major difficulties before they appear on the Secretary of State's radar. Regular stocktakes (reviews of progress) monthly, or even more often, are an essential part of tracking progress on key priorities; and much more efficient than responding ad hoc to problems and crises as they arise or become media stories.

A degree of ruthlessness in relation to meetings with stakeholders can also free up time but there is a balance to be struck. Kelly had strict criteria to

determine whom she would meet; the problem was particularly acute for her, she told us, because she was combining being Secretary of State with bringing up a young family which she was determined not to neglect. You couldn't get a meeting with her if you were graded lower than 2+ on her four-point scale. That meant ensuring that the private office worked effectively and that the diary secretary got regular brief slots of the minister's time. For Kelly that helped ensure that her diary aligned with her priorities.

For Johnson, it was important that meetings started and finished punctually. This discipline helped create a culture that the department came to reflect. Recognition of the diary secretary, the pleases and thank-yous and apologies for the endless diary changes the role demands, all make a difference. (And, by the way, it's worth a Secretary of State remembering to foster his or her relationship with the PM's diary secretary as well).

**But when it comes to time, we come back, most of all, to a central observation: all the Secretaries of State just wanted more of it in the job they came to love.**

## Section 4: Party political perspectives

It was striking how little party politics featured in our conversations. Of course, all the Secretaries of State were committed to their political party and wanted to deliver for the government of which they were part. But, regardless of party, the things they wrestled with and the themes that run through this 30+ year period are remarkably consistent.

There are differences of emphasis in the political philosophies between the parties, but the differences are less than our confrontational British model of politics (and reporting of educational issues) might suggest. Also, there are different strands of thinking within parties as well as between them and these strands are often in tension, if not in complete contradiction. It is worth briefly teasing these out.

### Conservative thinking

Over these three decades, three distinct Conservative perspectives can be identified. The first, represented most vividly by Baker, is that the task of the school system is to prepare students for the increasingly technologically driven economy of the future. This, he argues, is what employers will want, what students will need if they are to find worthwhile employment and what the country will require to thrive economically. Hence Baker's commitment to City Technology Colleges (CTCs) when Secretary of State, and his continuing commitment to the University Technical Colleges (UTCs) he has established. We have seen this thinking re-emerge with the emphasis Williamson placed on skills and further education.

The second is a commitment to a traditional curriculum, traditional teaching methods and traditional exams. This strand was perhaps most visible in the Gove era, advocated consistently by Gove's Minister of State, Nick Gibb, with an emphasis on British history, phonics and norm-referenced exams

but it was present too in Baker's early versions of the National Curriculum.

The third is the idea of devolving power to schools, reducing bureaucracy and freeing up headteachers to innovate and run state schools as their peers do in the private sector. This too featured in Baker's legislation – with the creation of GM schools, for example – and again in the Gove era with the extension of academies and the idea of free schools. Local authorities have little role in this approach while a powerful regulator, such as Ofsted, becomes a key factor in the thinking.

People will have different views on the value of these strands; each has its strengths. What is clear though is that there are tensions between them. For example, imposing a traditional curriculum sits uneasily with freeing up headteachers and we sometimes saw this tension play out. Similarly, the traditional view of the curriculum is sometimes in tension with the modernising agenda related to technological transformation. The successful Conservative Secretaries of State found ways to manage the tensions between these strands and sometimes to combine them into a way forward.

### Labour thinking

The three themes that feature in Conservative thinking are also apparent in Labour thought during this period. The idea of devolution of power and responsibility to schools was perhaps the strongest intellectual strand of the three decades, pursued by successive governments, regardless of party. As a result, we now have a National Funding Formula, academy chains and a minimal role in school standards for local authorities. Among the Labour Ministers, Blunkett also championed much of the traditional agenda including phonics, mental arithmetic, citizenship and British history. And every government understood the

significance of the technological revolution, ICT as it became known, though approaches to it varied. In this sense, it is true to say that Baker set an agenda for all his successors, Labour as well as Conservative.

But there are also distinctly Labour strands of thinking. While all the Secretaries of State were committed to greater equity and closing gaps, Labour Ministers are more likely to emphasise it in their rhetoric and to apply the power of the state to bring it about. Hence, for example, SureStart, the rapid expansion of pre-school provision, floor targets in literacy and numeracy and initiatives to improve circumstances for children in care.

Labour Ministers are also perhaps more likely than Conservatives to intervene in the system. While it was Shephard who set this thinking in motion with the intervention in Hackney Downs, it was in the Blunkett era that it peaked, with interventions not just in underperforming schools but also in underperforming LEAs, a policy on which Morris led while she was Minister of State. It is interesting that most of the local education authorities where Blunkett and Morris intervened were Labour-led, a good example of putting performance ahead of party politics.

In Labour governments the instinct, when a problem arose, was that something must be done, whereas Conservative governments sometimes thought it better to leave things to resolve themselves. In practice all Secretaries of State resort to both; it is a difference of emphasis rather than a dividing line.

Labour policy over the years was generally more sympathetic to the local authority role than Conservative policy. Blunkett and Morris would argue that the interventions they led were designed to improve LEAs (though others, emphasising the New in New Labour, such as Andrew Adonis, wanted to take them out of the picture altogether). The Balls reforms strengthened local authorities in relation to the

"children's agenda" but in parallel the priority they gave to school standards dropped.

A Labour perspective also tends to highlight inputs, especially spending as a good in itself; hence the class size pledge in 1997 and the school building programme. While all the Secretaries of State know they depend on finding a way of working with teachers and the public sector workforce, Labour is more likely to want a continuing, constructive dialogue with the unions. This exemplified most clearly in this period by the social partnership developed by Charles Clarke and David Miliband or Balls's determination to speak at all the teacher union conferences.

But this didn't mean the unions had it all their own way. Expenditure on education grew but in return successive Labour governments emphasised accountability, building on the Conservative reforms of the 1990s. Ofsted and performance tables remained firmly in place. In Blair's phrase, the deal was "Investment for Reform".

While these emphases are more associated with Labour, much the same applies here as to the Conservative strands; they feature too throughout the period. All the Secretaries of State want a good spending settlement; all want to find ways of working with teachers. Those who were expected to calm things down, such as Shephard, Morgan and Hinds, had no choice but to find ways of doing so.

On spending, schools have become an increasing priority for all governments over the last 30 years, regardless of party politics. It is hard to remember that this was by no means always the case in the 150 years of state education, as illustrated by the Geddes cuts of 1921 and the relative lack of priority given to education by successive governments before the Baker reforms.

There had always been a general Conservative belief that, if possible, taxes should be lower and therefore overall expenditure constrained, which inevitably has implications for the public services such as education. This was most evident in the mid-1980s, just before Baker's appointment. Since then, Conservative chancellors have realised the significance of education both to families and to Britain's future, and the political risks of cutting it. As the economic cycle has played out in these years, Conservative governments had to deal with austerity (early 1990s; 2010-2017) while Labour governments were in power during a period of steady growth in the economy. It is true that the financial crisis hit Brown's government hard, but it had barely begun to deal with the public expenditure consequences before the 2010 election. As a matter of fact, over the thirty years before the pandemic, public expenditure was around 40 percent of GDP, with relatively minor fluctuations according to the state of the economy but, of that, education's share increased.

### Liberal Democrat thinking

Though there was no Liberal Democrat Secretary of State in this period, they were not without influence in the Cameron-led Coalition. David Laws was an influential minister in education who worked harmoniously with Michael Gove. Nick Clegg, as Deputy Prime Minister, took a close interest in education. Their signature contribution to schools was the Pupil Premium which was implemented fully (and warmly welcomed) during the period of austerity. Beyond that, their instincts were to support devolution and to leave more to the professionals. This chimed well with one of the three strands of Conservative thinking set out above but not with all of them.

This just leaves us to pull out the consistent threads through these years, threads that have underpinned the work of all the Secretaries of State, regardless of party. These were:

1. Education is a priority and within education, schools are a priority. This is a dramatic shift since the James Callaghan Ruskin speech of 1976 and has resulted in increasing the proportion of total expenditure devoted to schools over our period.
2. Setting clear standards has been a consistent feature, with differing degrees of emphasis.
3. The importance of accountability has been a feature throughout these years, though again the degree of emphasis on it has ebbed and flowed and the Ofsted and testing regimes have varied over time.
4. There has been sustained commitment to the idea that money and responsibility should be devolved to school level within a framework of accountability – it's easy to forget that until 1988, this was not the case (though Cambridgeshire and one or two other local education authorities had begun to experiment in the mid-1980s).
5. No-one has advocated using regulated private providers of schools (as, by contrast, governments of both major parties have allowed in the provision of routine operations in the NHS).
6. A theme that appeared again and again in our interviews was "character", resilience or, as the education jargon sometimes calls it, self-efficacy. Regardless of party, Secretaries of State saw an important need here but found it hard to get traction. Perhaps it is an example of something that ministers can advocate while leaving its development to school leaders and schools. It is certainly unfinished business and perhaps always will be.

# Section 5: Profiles of the Seventeen



## Kenneth Baker

Secretary of State for  
Education and Science

May 1986 – July 1989

Conservative

Prime Minister: Margaret Thatcher



## John MacGregor

Secretary of State for  
Education

July 1989 – November 1990

Conservative

Prime Minister: Margaret Thatcher

(Not interviewed so text below is purely from the authors)



### What did you aspire to achieve?

A radical shake-up of the 1944 settlement including a National Curriculum, more autonomy for schools (from local authorities) and a higher priority for technical education and technology. But the first task was resolving the teachers' strikes.

### What did you achieve?

Grant Maintained Schools were established as well as City Technical Colleges backed by sponsors. The principle of the National Curriculum was established along with testing at 7, 11, 14 and 16. The Inner London Education Authority was abolished.

### What did you regret not achieving?

As a result of the settlement of the teachers' dispute, pay and conditions could not be revisited; that meant that the school day could not be extended. That still needs to be addressed as it has been in University Technical Colleges.

### What is the key to making progress?

Boldness. Surprising the PM by announcing the National Curriculum on television before it had been agreed was an effective tactic; and the inclusion of 11 pages on education reform in the 1987 Conservative manifesto provided the mandate for reform.

### What were the barriers?

They were extensive given the radical reforms being pursued and included opposition from teaching unions. It also proved difficult to get agreement from the multiple stakeholders on the content of the National Curriculum – even in Maths.

### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

Ministers need to know their subject and be passionate about it. Work with officials at all levels, not just the most senior.

### What did you aspire to achieve?

To calm things down after the Baker years. To be a safe pair of hands.

### What did you achieve?

It was a brief period in this office and things did calm down while crises over Europe and the poll tax engulfed the Thatcher administration.

### What did you regret not achieving?

No interview

### What is the key to making progress?

No interview

### What were the barriers?

No interview

### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

No interview



## Ken Clarke

Secretary of State for  
Education and Science

November 1990 - April 1992

Conservative

Prime Minister: Margaret Thatcher



## John Patten

Secretary of State for  
Education

April 1992 - July 1994

Conservative

Prime Minister: John Major



### What did you aspire to achieve?

There was a ready-made agenda as the implementation of the Baker reforms had stalled and needed reinvigorating. This was coupled with additional reforms to take the principle of school accountability further.

### What did you achieve?

Implementing Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) and publishing the results school by school. The National Curriculum was introduced against substantial opposition. School inspection, which had been ineffectual and irregular, was overhauled with the introduction of Ofsted.

### What did you regret not achieving?

Not doing enough to reform further education and particularly not getting colleges the support they needed.

### What is the key to making progress?

Getting hold of the department and ensuring work in progress is fully implemented. The special advisers and the private office had an important role in ensuring that decisions that had been taken were followed through and implemented.

### What were the barriers?

Overcoming the cultural resistance to education reform within both the department and some local authorities. The educational establishment also made the introduction of the National Curriculum a battle.

### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

Don't rush into things. Take time to master the brief and be sceptical when asked to sign off important decisions in the first few days or weeks.

### What did you aspire to achieve?

Implementation of national testing and the new Ofsted regime.

### What did you achieve?

Chris Woodhead as Chief Inspector put the Ofsted regime in place. The Dearing Review of the National Curriculum was important.

### What did you regret not achieving?

National testing ran into conflict, as a result of which the tests were boycotted in 1993 and, to a much lesser extent, in 1994.

### What is the key to making progress?

No interview

### What were the barriers?

No interview

### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

No interview

## Gillian Shephard

### Secretary of State for Education

July 1994 - July 1995 and for Education and Employment, July 1995 - May 1997

Conservative

Prime Minister: John Major



## David Blunkett

### Secretary of State for Education and Employment

May 1997 - June 2001

Labour

Prime Minister: Tony Blair



#### What did you aspire to achieve?

The entrenchment of education reforms already underway by, for example, defusing opposition from teachers to testing. And then improving literacy and numeracy.

#### What did you achieve?

The national testing programme went ahead after the boycotts of 1993-4. The pilot projects on literacy and numeracy paved the way for the considerable progress that successive governments have now made in these areas. Following the Hackney Downs intervention, the principle that governments would act on individual failing schools was established.

#### What did you regret not achieving?

Only partially doing the things that needed doing. Not doing more to take forward reforms of further education.

#### What is the key to making progress?

Ensuring there are well-motivated teachers led by high quality headteachers is essential. The Secretary of State does not teach in classrooms!

#### What were the barriers?

There was little scope for new initiatives given the political position of a government that was near the end of its life. It was therefore important to work with Blunkett to establish continuity.

#### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

Be clear about your objectives, having accumulated enough knowledge of what is achievable and what is not. As far as possible, take teachers with you.

#### What did you aspire to achieve?

An absolute transformation of educational standards which, in some schools, were scandalous. Tackling that was wasn't a job, it was a mission and needed support across government and the backing of parents.

#### What did you achieve?

The idea that standards really mattered was embedded and communities were mobilised in support of that agenda. There was a jigsaw of initiatives that fitted together – early years, primary education, a coherent curriculum, and better school leadership.

#### What did you regret not achieving?

Not placing enough emphasis on the importance of the family in raising expectations and aspirations. More needed to be done to overcome the idea in some communities that education didn't matter and to address the difficulties some parents had in supporting their children.

#### What is the key to making progress?

Being confident that the approach was right and to pursue it while avoiding the arrogance of failing to listen to advice. Working as a coherent team of ministers, advisers and officials.

#### What were the barriers?

The enormity of what we were doing and the scale of the opposition.

#### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

Build on what's there and working rather than introduce more headline changes for the sake of it. Work out priorities and stick to them.



## Estelle Morris

Secretary of State for  
Education and Skills

June 2001 - October 2002

Labour

Prime Minister: Tony Blair



## Charles Clarke

Secretary of State for  
Education and Skills

October 2002 - December 2004

Labour

Prime Minister: Tony Blair



### What did you aspire to achieve?

The continuation of the education reforms already underway in primary schools and extending that to secondary schools. A focus on the quality of teaching in the classroom.

### What did you achieve?

Major reforms to the teaching profession, a process that started in 1998. In terms of school leadership, the changes introduced are still in place today.

### What did you regret not achieving?

Failing to convince Downing Street that pedagogy was more important than structural reform and the move to academies. It wasn't until 2007 that there was a realisation that schools needed to be interdependent and local authorities were important.

### What is the key to making progress?

Managing both the education and political agendas. Education reform needs patience, trust and the constant testing of whether the approach is right. But it's also a politically charged area with media interest that needs to be adroitly handled.

### What were the barriers?

The battle between the Treasury and Downing Street over student loans froze the department. Lack of a strong team of advisers and officials was also a barrier and made the transition from Minister of State to Secretary of State difficult.

### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

Choose one thing that really matters to you and see it through, even if it's outside the main agenda of the department. Learn to love schools and when you stop enjoying it, hand in your notice.

### What did you aspire to achieve?

Rapid resolution of the inherited difficulty over exam grading, a long-term solution for university funding and giving the skills agenda a much higher priority.

### What did you achieve?

Despite very significant opposition, university funding and student finance were resolved. More collaboration rather than competition was introduced by extending specialist status to all schools. Sector Skills Councils were established, bringing together industry and education to collaborate over training needs.

### What did you regret not achieving?

Not implementing the Tomlinson Report was a big, long-term mistake for Labour. But a reshuffle, an election and opposition from Downing Street put paid to it. At the local authority level, bringing Children's Social Services into Education was not a success as focus and coherence was lost.

### What is the key to making progress?

A small core group of people in key positions – Ministers, advisers, Downing Street, officials – acting as a "guiding coalition." Beyond that, wider stakeholders need to be cultivated and an experience of local government is also useful.

### What were the barriers?

Downing Street was too conservative in its approach to the Tomlinson Report.

### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

Develop a clear idea of what the priorities are and a convincing articulation of the rationale for changes. Delay is rarely a good idea – tackling things early is usually the right answer.

## Ruth Kelly

Secretary of State for  
Education and Skills

December 2004 - May 2006

Labour

Prime Minister: Tony Blair



## Alan Johnson

Secretary of State for  
Education and Skills

May 2006 - June 2007

Labour

Prime Minister: Tony Blair



### What did you aspire to achieve?

A more important role for parents in terms of how their children were educated and the promotion of diversity and choice within the education system via academies. A strong emphasis on education standards and behaviour.

### What did you achieve?

Defusing the difficulties over Tomlinson by accepting some aspects of the report but maintaining the A Level system as their value was so widely recognised. The controversial White Paper established the idea of academy chains, the forerunner of multi-academy trusts. The Extended School initiative with facilities being opened up after hours – “Kelly Hours”.

### What did you regret not achieving?

Not getting more political support for school reform and the expansion of the academy programme. Political presentation of the reforms was confused.

### What is the key to making progress?

Managing the politics of reform is as important as the policy itself. A good set of advisers, officials and junior ministers is key.

### What were the barriers?

The scope of the department means unpredictable issues such as List 99 can arise and cause significant difficulties. Not enough alignment (or contact) with Downing Street, particularly over presentation and policy such as the role of local authorities.

### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

Establish clear priorities, make sure the diary is aligned with those priorities and chase progress vigorously.

### What did you aspire to achieve?

The resolution of high-profile difficulties such as List 99 and the passing of the Education and Inspection Bill which was secured despite 68 Labour rebels. The narrowing of social inequality in education, particularly access to universities.

### What did you achieve?

Starting the process towards raising the education leaving age to 18 by getting agreement from Downing Street and the Treasury. Significantly improving education provision for children in care.

### What did you regret not achieving?

Not staying longer and being able to see through the lifting of the education leaving age. The failure to resolve the difficulties over the decline in the numbers being taught modern languages.

### What is the key to making progress?

The experience of having previously been a minister in the department provided a head start. Ensuring there is a good relationship between special advisers and the civil servants at the department – it was a harmonious team.

### What were the barriers?

The transition between Blair and Brown absorbed a lot of energy and it was difficult to get things done. Although everything needed to be cleared by the Treasury, they would not engage in the academy agenda.

### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

Recognise that the depth and breadth of department goes beyond schools and make the further education sector a priority as well.



## Ed Balls

Secretary of State for  
Children, Schools and  
Families

June 2007 - May 2010

Labour

Prime Minister: Gordon Brown



## Michael Gove

Secretary of State for  
Education

May 2010 - July 2014

Conservative (in a Coalition  
Government)

Prime Minister: David Cameron



### What did you aspire to achieve?

The aim was to break down the barriers to children's progress, well-being and happiness right across children's services. On the narrower education agenda, the aim was to use academies to turn around failing schools.

### What did you achieve?

Many primary schools were already implementing an "every child matters" approach but the Children's Plan convinced more relevant parties to work together. That targeted children whose opportunities and progress were being thwarted by issues beyond the education system. On narrower education issues, academies were used, supported by local authorities, to target failing schools.

### What did you regret not achieving?

The big failing was not persuading Michael Gove that the "every child matters" approach was the right one. Not making more progress on further education.

### What is the key to making progress?

Building enough consensus so that reforms last. Stakeholder engagement to win hearts and minds is vital particularly where a new policy is being rolled out.

### What were the barriers?

Trying to do too much, particularly tackling culture change. On top of this, issues such as the Baby P case were particularly difficult, and they overloaded the child protection system.

### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

Get stakeholder buy-in. Tap into the fact that whatever the experience in Whitehall, people on the ground are better at collaborating. Never accept excuses for poor performance.

### What did you aspire to achieve?

The aspiration was to address the gulf between the educational experience of those going to the best and those going to the weakest schools. There was also a need to create a dynamic that drove the educational system towards excellence.

### What did you achieve?

On structures, the drive to academies was accelerated and expanded to primary schools. On standards, a more knowledge-rich National Curriculum was established, grade inflation was tackled, and more emphasis placed on exams.

### What did you regret not achieving?

More should have been done to address vocational education such as achieving a better accountability framework for post-16 FE colleges. Not doing enough on teacher training, particularly the quality of those coming into the profession.

### What is the key to making progress?

Establishing a strong sense of purpose – some didn't like but it was widely understood. It was backed by the PM and, initially, the Lib Dems. "Signalling" direction of travel early on through legislation on accelerating the academies programme was important in establishing momentum.

### What were the barriers?

The Department took time to adjust to new priorities and advisers such as Dominic Cummings were important in overcoming that. There was, however, a price to pay. As opposition from teachers increased, support from the Lib Dems frayed.

### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

Be clear about moral purpose and how everything big or small relates to that. Get accountability clear and keep asking whether your policies are making a difference.



## Nicky Morgan

Secretary of State for  
Education

July 2014 - July 2016  
Conservative (in a Coalition  
Government until May 2016)  
Prime Minister: David Cameron



## Justine Greening

Secretary of State for  
Education

July 2016 - January 2018  
Conservative  
Prime Minister: Theresa May



### What did you aspire to achieve?

To see through the Gove reforms but in a less confrontational way. There was also an agenda around developing young people's character and better mental health.

### What did you achieve?

The level of noise around education reform was reduced in the lead up to the 2015 general election. Schools were quick to embrace the "character" agenda as it was already being taught in many areas.

### What did you regret not achieving?

Not convincing smaller schools in Conservative areas of the merits of being part of multi-academies. As a result, the unsatisfactory dual system of academies/local authorities continues. The introduction of PSHE was too politically sensitive.

### What is the key to making progress?

Relationships with colleagues are important, particularly at ministerial level at the Treasury. It helps to have served there. A cup of coffee with relevant colleagues just before Cabinet can sometimes resolve issues quickly.

### What were the barriers?

Political nervousness in Downing Street about all schools becoming academies meant the policy had to be abandoned. From 2016 on, the EU referendum meant there was little room for anything else.

### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

Question anything urgent that comes for signature in the first few days – there is probably a reason someone else didn't agree it. Visit schools as much as possible to see at first-hand what is happening. And learn from the experiences of former Secretaries of State – many educational issues are not party political.

### What did you aspire to achieve?

To make social mobility and levelling up the defining mission of the department.

### What did you achieve?

The new funding formula for schools was a big achievement but additional resources should have been made available to compensate areas that lost out. Progress was made on the social mobility action plan and Opportunity Areas started to see big improvements in literacy and numeracy.

### What did you regret not achieving?

Some progress was made on T Levels but more needed to be done to blend academic and vocational education. Place-based education initiatives such as Opportunity Areas needed to be rolled out at scale.

### What is the key to making progress?

Good management information is critical in knowing which projects are on track and which need attention. Detailed implementation plans are important so the delivery unit in the department was improved and project management, rather than policy, was promoted as the most important skill.

### What were the barriers?

National politics was turbulent during the period and at odds with an evidence-based approach to what worked. Tension with Downing Street over the Augar Review, grammar schools and faith schools was difficult. Overall, within government, there was a short-term tokenism in tackling deep seated issues.

### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

Avoid getting bogged down in multiple cross-departmental initiatives within central government. Look at what works locally and apply that more broadly.



## Damian Hinds

Secretary of State for  
Education

January 2018 - July 2019  
Conservative  
Prime Minister: Theresa May



## Gavin Williamson

Secretary of State for  
Education

July 2019 - September 2021  
Conservative  
Prime Minister: Boris Johnson



### What did you aspire to achieve?

The political difficulties of Brexit limited the scope for major initiatives. Beyond running the department well, social mobility was a priority. Children spend much of their early lives at home, so the sensitive issues of the home learning environment need to be tackled.

### What did you achieve?

Three successive ministers had grappled with teachers' workload and it did finally start to fall according to the "hours worked" survey. That helped recruitment and retention. Continuing progress was made on the introduction of T Levels although a Ministerial Direction had to be issued to overcome a delay proposed by officials.

### What did you regret not achieving?

More could have been done in the area of education technology. The pandemic has shown just how important that is.

### What is the key to making progress?

There are more stakeholders (including parents) than in many other departments. A strong relationship with them is important. Ruthless focus on a small number of priorities is needed but the scope of the department makes that difficult.

### What were the barriers?

The political and economic difficulties of the government over Brexit restricted funding and legislative time. Officials were not barriers but were sometimes too accommodating and not challenging enough.

### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

Bedside manner and managing relationships well are important. Trust your officials and build strong relationships so they can bring you bad news when it is necessary.

### What did you aspire to achieve?

Extra prominence for and reform of the skills agenda. It had been consistently neglected and was not initially seen as central to the government's agenda. Given that the management of school trusts had evolved, it was important to assess what was working and what wasn't.

### What did you achieve?

Significant progress was made on a more coherent approach to skills. Skills have also become central to the government's priorities and a key part of levelling up. The skills agenda is now central to the PM's agenda and supported by the Treasury.

### What did you regret not achieving?

Not being able to complete and launch the schools reform white paper that was looking at the approach to trusts.

### What is the key to making progress?

A steeliness and a grit so that current issues can be faced while developing a longer-term agenda. Aligning skills with competitiveness to gain Treasury support.

### What were the barriers?

The pandemic was the biggest barrier any Education Minister has faced since World War II. Many decisions about schools and universities became health rather than education decisions. There were no precedents to draw on for the decisions that had to be taken.

### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

All decisions will get criticised, but the worst thing is to do nothing. Don't expect to be viewed fairly and develop the hide of a rhinoceros.

## Nadhim Zahawi

Secretary of State for  
Education

15 September 2021 - present  
Conservative  
Prime Minister: Boris Johnson



### What did you aspire to achieve?

Too early to say but a wonderful letter was sent by him to headteachers and teachers at the start of tenure: "I know, profoundly and at first hand, how important your work is...when I first came to the UK...my English was poor and I hid in the back of classrooms..."

### What did you achieve?

Too early to say

### What did you regret not achieving?

Too early to say

### What is the key to making progress?

Too early to say

### What were the barriers?

Too early to say

### What advice would you give a new Secretary of State?

Too early to say

# Section 6: 1988 – 2021: An idiosyncratic and highly selective chronology

Year	PM	SoS	Key Education Reforms	Major events	Wider culture
1988	Thatcher	Baker	1988 Education Reform Act 1st GCSE exams taken	Soviet Union begins withdrawal from Afghanistan	Inaugural Red Nose Day
1989	Thatcher	Baker McGregor	First teaching of National Curriculum First CTC opened	Fall of Berlin Wall - Tiananmen Square demonstrations	Death of Laurence Olivier
1990	Thatcher	Clarke	Abolition of the Inner London Education Authority	Fall of Margaret Thatcher: "funny old world" she says.	Nessun Dorma as theme music for television coverage of Italia 1990
1991	Major	Clarke Patten	First key stage tests	Gulf War begins - IRA bomb blasts No 10	<i>Silence of the Lambs</i> wins Oscar for best film
<b>1992*</b>	Major	Patten	Law creating Ofsted goes through just before the election <i>Choice and Diversity</i> White Paper	Maastricht Treaty agreed (with UK opt outs) - Black Wednesday	Barcelona Olympics
1993	Major	Patten	Boycott of National Curriculum tests	Czechoslovakia is peacefully split into two countries Single market established in EU	<i>Jurassic Park</i> released
1994	Major	Patten Shephard	Implementation of English in National Curriculum Chris Woodhead appointed Chief Inspector	NAFTA established between Canada, US and Mexico	World Cup in USA won by Brazil 3rd consecutive win for Ireland in Eurovision Song Contest
1995	Major	Shephard	Closure of Hackney Downs School	First full year of an entirely privatised internet Collapse of Barings Bank	Seamus Heaney wins Nobel Prize for Literature
1996	Major	Shephard	1996 Education Act consolidates education law	BSE crisis – EU prohibits British beef Blair: "Education, education and education" speech	Euro '96 in England Atlanta Olympics
<b>1997</b>	Major Blair	Shephard Blunkett	<i>Excellence in Schools</i> White Paper	Death of Princess Diana	First Harry Potter book published
1998	Blair	Blunkett	School Standards and Framework Act <i>Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change</i> Green Paper	Good Friday Agreement	First showing of <i>Who Wants to be a Millionaire</i> France wins World Cup at home
1999	Blair	Blunkett	Literacy and Numeracy hours in full implementation	Euro currency established and European Central Bank assumes its powers	First use of the words "blog" and "texting"

2000	Blair	Blunkett	National College for Schools Leadership founded	First draft of genome project published GW Bush elected in very close election	Margaret Atwood wins Booker Prize for <i>The Blind Assassin</i>
<b>2001</b>	Blair	Blunkett Morris	Academies policy takes off	9/11	<i>A Beautiful Mind</i> wins Oscar for best film
2002	Blair	Blunkett Morris	2002 Education Act extending freedoms to successful schools	Funeral of Queen Mother	World Cup in Japan/Korea won by Brazil
2003	Blair	Clarke	Green Paper <i>Every Child Matters</i> published	Iraq war	<i>The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King</i> top grossing film
2004	Blair	Clarke Kelly	Tomlinson Report on 14-19 curriculum and exams published	Indian Ocean tsunami	Kelly Holmes wins double gold in Athens <i>The Line of Beauty</i> (Alan Hollinghurst) wins Booker Prize
<b>2005</b>	Blair	Kelly	Teacher Training Agency becomes the Training and Development Agency with stronger powers	G7 Make Poverty History summit at Gleneagles Hurricane Katrina	England finally regains Ashes and Liverpool wins Champions League in "Miracle of Istanbul" YouTube founded
2006	Blair	Kelly Johnson	2006 legislation establishes the idea of trust schools	Saddam Hussein found guilty in Iraqi Court and executed	No.5, 1948 by Jackson Pollock sold for \$140 million (in spite of being awful)
2007	Blair Brown	Johnson Balls	Plans to extend the education leaving age to 17 and then 18	Blair steps down, Brown becomes PM	Doris Lessing wins Nobel Prize for Literature
2008	Brown	Balls	Education and Skills Act raises leaving age	Collapse of Lehman Brothers Election of Barack Obama	Beijing Olympics
2009	Brown	Balls	Jim Rose's revision of the primary school curriculum published	G20 Summit in London helps manage global economy	<i>Slumdog Millionaire</i> wins 9 BAFTAs including best film
<b>2010</b>	Brown Cameron	Balls Gove	Academies Act passed within 3 months of the election	Coalition government formed for first time since War	Spain wins the World Cup in South Africa
2011	Cameron	Gove	Bonfire of the quangos First Free Schools opened EBacc proposed	Riots in London and elsewhere during August	Wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton
2012	Cameron	Gove	Gove refuses to intervene in downgrading of English GCSE results	Diamond Jubilee for Queen Elizabeth II Obama re-elected	London Olympics



2013	Cameron	Gove	Revised National Curriculum announced – Computing replaces ICT	Francis becomes the first Latin American Pope	Peter Higgs is a British winner of the Nobel Prize for Physics for work on the origin of the mass of subatomic particles
2014	Cameron	Gove Morgan	Controversy over extremism in Birmingham schools	Scottish referendum rejects independence	Malala is the youngest ever winner of the Nobel Peace Prize Gay marriage becomes law
<b>2015</b>	Cameron	Morgan	Revised GCSE and A Level programmes introduced	Justin Trudeau elected Canadian PM	NASA's New Horizons reaches Pluto
2016	Cameron May	Morgan Greening	Two-thirds of secondary schools now academies	UK votes to leave EU Donald Trump elected	England loses to Iceland at Euros
<b>2017</b>	May	Greening	After the election, plans for grammar schools are abandoned Social mobility action plan	Manchester concert bombed by ISIL London Bridge attack Grenfell Tower fire	<i>Star Wars: The Last Jedi</i> grosses \$1.3bn
2018	May	Greening Hinds	National Funding Formula "soft" launch	Novichok poisonings in Salisbury	England wins a penalty shoot-out for the first time at the World Cup (in Russia)
<b>2019</b>	May Johnson	Hinds Williamson	PISA results show improvement in England but not Scotland	Donald Trump meets Kim Jong-Un in Singapore	Margaret Atwood wins Man Booker Prize for <i>The Testaments</i> shared with Bernardine Evaristo for <i>Girl, Woman, Other</i>
2020	Johnson	Williamson	COVID-19 pandemic disrupts everything; lockdown disrupts schools, colleges and universities and we all learn how to use Zoom and Teams		People bang pots and pans on their doorsteps for the NHS Anti-racism protests and the tearing down of statues
2021	Johnson	Williamson Zahawi	September – children back in school	US Capitol attacked First rain, rather than snow, in North Pole COP26 in Glasgow	England reaches Euro 2020 (postponed) final Emma Raducanu wins US Open tennis

\*Election Years in bold

## Bibliography

Adonis, A. (2012) *Education, Education, Education, Reforming England's Schools*, London, Biteback.

Balls, E. (2016) *Speaking Out*, London, Hutchinson.

Baker, K. (1993) *The Turbulent Years*, London, Faber and Faber.

Barber, M. (2021) *Accomplishment: How to Achieve Ambitious and Challenging Things*, London, Penguin.

Barber, M. (2016) *How to Run a Government*, London, Penguin.

Blair, T. (2010) *A Journey*, London, Penguin Random House.

Brown, G. (2017) *My Life, Our Times*, London, The Bodley Head.

Blunkett, D. (2006) *The Blunkett Tapes*, London, Bloomsbury.

Cameron, D. (2019) *For the Record*, London, William Collins.

Clarke, C. (2014) *The Too Difficult Box*, London, Biteback.

Clarke, C. and Byrne, E. (2020) *The University Challenge*, London, Pearson.

Clarke, K. (2016) *Kind of Blue*, London, Macmillan.

Gillard, D. (2018) *Education in England: a history - timeline*, <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/history/timeline.html>

Johnson, A. (2014) *This Boy: A Memoir of a Childhood*, London, Corgi.

Johnson, A. (2017) *The Long and Winding Road*, London, Corgi.

Kotter, J. (1996) *Leading Change*, Boston, Harvard University Press.

Major, J. (1999) *The Autobiography*, London, Harper Collins.

Moore, C. (2020) *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorised Biography Vol. III*, London, Penguin.

Riddell, P., Gruhn, Z. and Carolan, L. (2011), *The Challenge of Being a Minister, Defining and Developing Ministerial Effectiveness*, Institute for Government, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/challenge-being-minister>

Shephard, G. (2000), *Shephard's Watch*, London, Politico's Publishing.

Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secretary\\_of\\_State\\_for\\_Education](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secretary_of_State_for_Education). Used liberally for chronology.

**About Sir Michael Barber:** Sir Michael Barber is Founder and Chairman of Delivery Associates which works with governments around the world to enable them to deliver outcomes citizens care about. He is the author of several books about government and public service reform, including his most recent book: *Accomplishment: How to Achieve Ambitious and Challenging Things* (Penguin 2021), described by Matthew Syed as "an excellent analysis, he has got to know all of the past Secretaries of State from Kenneth Baker onwards."

### About Patrick Law:

Patrick Law has just completed a MA in Contemporary History and Politics at King's College, London. Previously, he was communications director at British Gas, Barratt Developments, and the Guinness Partnership. He is now strategic counsel at the Built Environment Communication Group.

**The Foundation for Education Development (FED)** is dedicated to promoting a long-term vision and plan for education in England. In the spirit of partnership, it provides a neutral space for policy influencers from education, business, politics and beyond to shape the future. [www.fed.education](http://www.fed.education)



