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Are enemies of excellence within?

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William Stewart asks who belongs to the education establishment blamed by politicians for thwarting schools' progress. If the Conservatives win the next general election, the education establishment can expect to find itself at war.

According to Nick Gibb, the shadow schools minister: "The root cause of educational underperformance in this country is ideology; not Labour or Conservative ideology, but ideology promoted by the educational establishment."

If you are a primary teacher resisting synthetic phonics, that could mean you. Mr Gibb describes the fight that he led to make this method of teaching literacy compulsory as "just a skirmish in a battle that is still to be won".

His colleague Michael Gove, the shadow schools secretary, this week described the party's latest batch of policies as "a drive to deal with the damage caused to our children by the complacent educational establishment and the teaching methods it has used".

That struck a chord with columnists such as Janet Daley who argued in The Daily Telegraph that "one government after another has been repeatedly out-manoeuvred by a self-serving alliance ... (a) troika of



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<p>The Conservatives have promised to get tough on some of education's progressive strongholds, but will this skirmishing lead to an all-out assault,

asks William Stewart</p>

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educational powers - the teaching unions, the colleges of education and the local education authorities".

Taking on the education world is not a new or exclusively Conservative idea. James Callaghan, the former Labour prime minister, started the trend, using much more measured terms, in his famous Ruskin College speech of October 1976, casting doubt on the era's new "informal" teaching methods.

In later years, the Tories had in Chris Woodhead, as chief schools inspector, a battering ram who was not afraid to criticise teachers and relished doing battle with an education establishment that he termed "the blob". New Labour went on to tackle local authorities - seen by many on the right as being at the heart of the education establishment - through greater centralisation and privatisation.

Senior advisers during the Blair era, such as Michael Barber, were also anxious to ensure there was no slipping back to 1970s-style teaching. He remains an adviser to Gordon Brown, who in his first education speech as Prime Minister warned of the "defeatist left-of-centre assertion that poor children can never overcome their disadvantage at school".

Mr Brown did not reveal whether it was educationists he was talking about. But Mr Gibb is more explicit, pinpointing university education departments, local authority officials and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority as being among the culprits.

And what are they guilty of?

"In essence, the ideology says that children should learn at their own pace and by self-discovery in a naturalistic, hands-on sort of way," said Mr Gibb.

He dates this ideology back to the 1920s theories of the American academic John Dewey. An education reformer, Dewey argued that teaching should not just be about imparting facts and greater emphasis should be placed on problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

But Professor Dylan Wiliam, deputy director of London University's Institute of Education, says the Tories have overestimated the practical impact that Dewey's ideas have had in UK schools.

Mr Gibb's analysis of the damaging effects of Dewey is based on a 1996 book, *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*, by another American academic, Eric Donald Hirsch Jr.

Hirsch argues that the United States has failed its pupils because of a prevalence of educational theories that result in them being taught critical thinking skills at the expense of subject content.

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that result in them being taught critical thinking skills at the expense of subject content.

Professor Wiliam, who has spent several years working in the USA, argues that Hirsch's analysis cannot be transferred to the UK because of a transatlantic gulf in approaches to teacher-training.

In America, he says, it is possible for trainees to get a licence to teach without spending any length of time in the classroom. In England, during a one-year PGCE course, 24 out of 36 weeks must be spent on practical work experience.

So while American trainees have huge exposure to whatever theory is being expounded in college, for their English counterparts that has become less and less the case.

"These theoretical debates go on, but the truth is that when trainees get into the classroom they do what works," says Professor Wiliam.

He also rejects the idea of an "education establishment" with a single, shared ideology. "In this institute, there may be some people who believe the stuff from the child-centred education perspective but many others disagree," he said.

If the charges levelled by the Conservatives are hard to pin on academia, then the Association of Teachers and Lecturers is a much easier target.

The union is quite explicit in backing curriculum reforms that would lead to exactly the kind of skills-based approach bemoaned by the Tories - although, like Professor Wiliam, it rejects "skills" versus "subject content" as a false dichotomy and believes it is impossible to teach one without the other.

Martin Johnson, the association's acting deputy general secretary, says that his arguments, far from being the product of an all-powerful cabal dictating what goes on in schools from behind the scenes, are actually struggling to get a hearing. He believes the real power in education now lies with central government and the institutions it controls.

"There used to be a more dissipated set of influences on teacher behaviour that the policies of the past 20 years were designed to overturn," he said. "They have been successful."

Under attack

"The unions are a part of what I call the blob, the educational establishment. Classroom teachers know that the educational establishment, the bureaucracy, is getting in the way of them doing the job that they want to do."

Chris Woodhead, 2002

"It is the road to the '70s to say each teacher knows best in their own classroom."

Sir Michael Barber, 2005

"The real enemy of excellence is the entrenched, complacent, educational establishment, which opposes greater rigour, is suspicious of anything considered traditional and has undermined tried and tested

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teaching methods because they are old-fashioned and authoritarian."


Michael Gove, 2007

"The dead hand of the educational establishment has for too long stifled both learning and debate."

The Daily Telegraph, 2007.

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