

General Secretary's address to Annual Conference 2023

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Not for publication before 00.01hrs Saturday 11 March 2023

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GENERAL SECRETARY'S SPEECH TO ASCL ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2023

As the saying goes, "Success is 80% showing up". So, to all of you here with us in person in Birmingham today, thank you so much for showing up. It means a lot. We are genuinely delighted to see you once again.

You'll know that one person who hasn't shown up is the Secretary of State for Education. We think that is a great shame. We believe you deserved to hear from her personally. We think it was the perfect opportunity for her so early in her tenure as a senior minister to thank you in person for all that you are doing in your schools and colleges.

But she's not here to do that - the first secretary of state, I gather, who has not spoken at our Conference since 2006. And Gillian Keegan says that she can't be here because she wants to focus on talks over pay and conditions.

I hope so. Let's show a spirit of generosity then, and treat this as a positive sign that the government is committed to putting an offer on the table to settle the industrial dispute and begin to address the teacher recruitment and retention crisis.

Because, to be frank, talks are pretty meaningless if there is no prospect of an offer, no genuine commitment to negotiate, no realistic endgame.

We can't go on trading fatuous soundbites.

Indeed, that's why we joined with other education unions this week in calling for ACAS to arbitrate. We said: if the government doesn't know how to manage negotiations, let's go to the professionals. But it seems that those constructive proposals have been rejected by the government, for reasons we cannot explain.

So here we are. This cannot go on. Teachers, leaders, families, communities, and especially the nation's children and young people – you all need this matter settled. We need to be able to recruit and retain great teachers and leaders in a way that isn't happening.

Today was the chance for Gillian Keegan to provide a progress report and a plan.

But, no, you've not got the Secretary of State. You've got me.

I'll leave you to decide whether I'm to be cast as the understudy, supply teacher, or stunt double.

I find myself therefore speaking in the slot reserved over all these years for the Secretary of State, and I'm going to set out in a little while what I would be doing, what I would be saying, if I were in her role.

And let me start off by doing something fundamental but essential. I want to pay tribute to you for everything that you have done to keep the wheels turning in these challenging times. You are facing a tsunami of pressures – funding, teacher shortages, and the continuing aftermath of the Covid pandemic.

I'm going to touch on that latter point because what we are hearing a lot at ASCL is just how challenging the behaviour of some of your students is at the moment. That's exacerbated by the fact that some of your families are also struggling to cope. And, while I don't fully understand the complex set of factors that are causing all this, it seems to me that there's something here about how unsettling and disruptive the pandemic has been to learning, mental health, levels of anxiety and behavioural norms.

The old rhythms and routines of our schools and colleges aren't proving enough to move many of our young people back to a sense of previous normality. Some things have changed that we cannot ignore.

When you throw into the mix the cost-of-living crisis and the erosion of local support services for children and families, it is perhaps not surprising that we are where we are.

What I do know is that this cannot be solved by that media cliché - a behaviour crackdown. Never has it been more important to get the right support in the right places at the right time for our pupils and students.

As Evelyn Forde has set out in her speech this morning, it cannot all fall on schools and colleges to do everything. At some point, educators have increasingly been expected to become an unofficial wing of social services, mental health services, and the police. Society's expectations of schools and colleges have increased while the resources available to education have decreased.

I'm not going to resort to that familiar trope about the system being broken. It isn't broken. You continue to do a fantastic job in your schools and colleges despite the circumstances – and millions of children receive a superb education because of your efforts. But it feels to me the system is under extraordinary strain. It's undoubtedly buckling, and we desperately need political leadership that is focused on finding solutions to the big issues.

Because as Barack Obama said: "What's troubling is not the magnitude of our problems but the smallness of our politics."

Can we have some big, bold politics please? Can we have some ambition at last?

We need to move beyond educational tinkering, beyond cheap soundbites, and finally tackle the big issues on behalf of children and young people.

So, let's look at what those issues and solutions might be. Let's examine what the Secretary of State for Education might have said if she were here today.

First, a commitment to resolve the pay and conditions dispute. No more political games. No more anti-union rhetoric. Just a straightforward, no-strings attached commitment to sort it out now. It's that simple.

Second, a recognition that funding and teacher supply simply also have to be sorted out. No government can possibly expect the education system to operate without the vital resources of enough money and enough teachers. We've often been told over the past decade that there are no magic money trees. And yet, whole forests of them appear when it suits the government. Of course, public spending decisions have to be made within the constraints of economic reality, but economic strategy and priorities are political decisions.

Frankly, education has simply not been the priority it should have been. If the government had made it a priority over the past ten or so years, we could have put far more investment into supporting the skills that are needed to make the country globally competitive and secure economic growth. Instead, we have had a decade of economic stagnation. The government has tried austerity, it has tried Brexit, it has issued lots of press releases and papers about levelling up, and there was a brief, mad moment when Liz Truss was given the chance to experiment – disastrously – with trickle-down economics.

All this time public services have suffered, treated as a cost to be squeezed rather than a vital component of economic growth in their own right. As a country, we must get our priorities right if we are to be a successful, thriving nation in the future. We have to move away from ideological hobby horses and focus on a practical long-term strategy that is founded on education as an investment in the future.

Third, an understanding that our so-called accountability system is out of all proportion to what any sensible system should look like. It does not merely provide a useful check for parents on the performance of schools and colleges as one might expect. It goes way beyond that and has become a squalid, self-sustaining industry in its own right that drives and drains the system in equal measure. Regional directors, Ofsted inspectors, the Education and Skills Funding Agency, and that giddy revolving door of ministers – please let it stop.

When I look at school performance tables, what I see is a bizarre mish-mash of arcane metrics and political fixations.

For example, the proportion of children entering EBacc subjects is a headline measure. Why? Are parents really concerned about what percentage of students take a particular combination of subjects? Can you imagine a conversation around a normal family dinner table about the merits of EBacc as a performance measure?

Ofsted reports, on the other hand, go to the other extreme – reducing everything that you do in your school or college to a single descriptor. If you are unlucky, then that descriptor can be a blunt 'requires improvement' or 'special measures', with all its consequences.

Your school or college may be taken over. You may lose your job. You will certainly have very difficult months or years ahead, trying to rebuild and repair shattered morale, amidst falling pupil rolls and teacher shortages.

And although we disagree on many matters, I welcome the Chief Inspector, who follows me on this platform, for being so prepared to engage with us.

But, in truth, too often the results of inspections feel like a lottery to school and college leaders – a hostile inspection team, or a teaching vacancy in a key subject area, or too much weight being put on negative feedback from a group of students.

All of these and more can make the experience and outcome of inspection feel less like a mirror held up to help us improve than a sword of Damocles dropped from above, with devastating consequences.

Few other high-performing education systems would think this normal or acceptable. Nor should we.

And that accountability juggernaut which our schools and colleges are subject to has consequences – it drives workload, stress and anxiety and it contributes to the exodus from the profession of leaders and teachers. It causes more problems than it solves – and that is surely the point at which any system has to be re-thought.

Fourth, if I were Secretary of State, I would want to be on the side of the voiceless, just as ASCL has been with the ‘Forgotten Third’ of young people given grades that close down opportunities.

The same issue is currently brewing up. If I were Secretary of State I would make a commitment to look again at the plan to defund large numbers of popular BTECs and similar qualifications. The aim of these reforms is clearly to drive students towards T levels, but this risks leaving a large number of students with no post-16 pathway which suits their needs or aspirations. The scale of the risk is very clear.

Last summer, nearly 117,000 students received grades in these Applied General Qualifications compared to 1,000 in T levels. Has the Department for Education modelled what routes this very large number of displaced students will take in the future? Has it risk-assessed whether removing Applied General Qualifications will in fact lead to an increase in so-called NEETs – that is young people who are not in education, employment and training? Or lead to a decline in higher education applications and access? Or the impact on equalities in terms of the number of students from disadvantaged and ethnic minority backgrounds who are negatively affected? From where I sit this feels utterly reckless and self-defeating.

A policy which seems destined to dispossess a very large group of students of a pathway which aids social mobility. It is the precise opposite of levelling up.

Fifth and finally, if I were Secretary of State, I would be pledging much more support for schools and colleges over the problems which proliferate over social media. We’ve seen this just lately with a spate of highly disruptive copycat protests in schools over issues like uniforms and toilet rules which have spread like wildfire after being posted on TikTok. Some of these posts are pretty nasty – targeting individual members of staff with highly offensive and unfounded allegations.

This is not the first time that there have been problems with abusive posts aimed at staff. To be fair to TikTok, they are responsive when we raise such problems, and we’ve worked hard to support schools with having offensive posts removed.

But social media in general – for all its merits in helping people to keep in touch and share thoughts and ideas – has given rise to an increasingly poisonous culture. Many of our members say that they spend inordinate amounts of time dealing with the fall-out of incidents on social media that haven't taken place on the school premises but affect their pupils. And we hear routinely of how student wellbeing is damaged by these rows, and of the horrible content that circulates online. In the meantime, the government's Online Safety Bill has still not passed into law despite having been in development for many years in various iterations. We recognise that there are no easy answers to all of this in a digital age, but the lack of urgency from the government, the sense of powerlessness, is intensely frustrating.

So, there you are. If I were Secretary of State for Education I would like to think that I would have said I would do those five things in the remaining months of this administration.

But the art of leadership is also about knowing what not to do.

And it seems to me that what we'd like to see a lot less of is the process of creeping centralisation that is evident in things like a new system of government-approved teacher training, and the establishment of Oak National Academy as a government arm's length provider of curriculum resources.

There are the obvious questions about whether this is really the right way to spend large amounts of time and money when there are huge systemic problems such as funding and teacher shortages which need to be addressed. And there is also the feeling among many of us that what we are seeing is in fact a backdoor method of reversing the promise of greater autonomy for schools and colleges that was once the government's big idea for education.

The new deal for education is more along the lines of: "You can have autonomy as long as you do what we say." It seems like the extension of an ideological debate about how education should be taught and delivered. The notion that Whitehall knows best. However, to borrow from the mantra of the New Labour government, what matters is what works. And what works will inevitably depend on context and circumstance. We firmly believe that you – the leaders of our schools and colleges – are best-placed to know your context, and that this is why autonomy is vital.

That mention of Labour brings us on to a final thought. This time next year, we may well be holding this Conference with the prospect of an imminent general election looming. We are very much looking forward to hearing the thoughts of the Shadow Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson when she addresses this Conference tomorrow. But it's important for us to say clearly here that ASCL has no party political affiliation. We are interested only in how the policies and ideas of political parties will benefit you and the communities you serve. We came into this business to improve the life chances of all young people. Please can we now do that?

So general elections are always a big moment. Here is a great opportunity for Labour, the Conservatives, and other parties, to set out their plans for education. I hope that they will address some of the issues that I have set out today, that they will bring a sense of freshness, vigour, optimism and ambition. That is the political leadership that you need and that children need.

We know that school and college leaders will always rise to the challenge. You have proved that over and over again, through the Covid years, and now during the current maelstrom of pressures and challenges. But you do need better support from the government and its agencies than is currently the case. I am an optimist by nature. I genuinely believe that all the things I have spoken about today are fixable. But doing so requires collaboration rather than conflict, the sense of a government working with the profession, and a long-awaited, long-term strategy for education that is backed up with sufficient resources.

That's what is needed.

But finally, I want to finish where I started – with you.

The writer Sarah Crossan said:

“beyond the wall of now
tomorrow is waiting”

I know that too many of you for far too long have felt hemmed in by that wall of now, constrained, powerless, feeling expected to solve everyone else's problems.

That's what it feels like to you. But as I look in I see something more. I see your extraordinary resilience, your humanity, your moral purpose, your embers of optimism.

Here at ASCL, we never cease to be inspired by your relentless determination to do the best for your students, families and communities. Amidst all the pressures, you continue to be beacons of hope.

You will have the chance over these two days to spend some time sharing thoughts and ideas with colleagues, enjoy listening to our keynote speakers, our extensive range of workshops, and visit our education exhibition. It is a rare moment for you to be able to step away from the day-to-day pressures, to have time to think and reflect, to step beyond the wall of now.

All of us at ASCL are immensely proud to represent you and to support you. We couldn't be prouder to look you in the eye, in person, to pay tribute to your exceptional leadership on behalf of communities, families, children and young people.

And remember:

“beyond the wall of now
tomorrow is waiting”

Have a great Conference. And thank you again for all that you do.