

# MICHAEL GOVE: MAKING WAVES

JANUARY–JULY 2014

**I**t was the morning of Tuesday 15 July 2014.

The newspapers were full of reshuffle speculation. It looked from initial reports that the reshuffle would amount to a ‘massacre of the moderates’, as Labour were billing the day. Ken Clarke was finally facing retirement from the Cabinet, along with other ‘liberal Tories’ such as David Willetts, Dominic Grieve and Andrew Lansley. Dominic Grieve, the Attorney General, had never quite been forgiven by David Cameron for making known privately the possibility of his resignation in late 2012, when David Cameron seemed set on breaching UK law by ignoring a possible European Court judgment on prisoner voting rights. To everyone’s immense relief, the court judgment went in the UK’s favour, avoiding what could otherwise have been a major political crisis.

In the evening of Monday 14 July, the shape of the reshuffle had started to emerge. Willian Hague was standing down as Foreign Secretary to be replaced by the rather bland bean-counter Philip Hammond. A list of soon-to-be-sacked ministers also emerged.

In my diary on 14 July I recorded: ‘All the logic points to Michael Gove staying put as Secretary of State for Education, but I can’t help feeling in the back of my mind that he still might be moved. However, I cannot for the life of me see where he could be moved to.’

On the Tuesday morning, I was in at my usual time of 6.45 a.m. I chaired some meetings on education policy and was about to leave my office for another meeting when Jonathan Crisp, one of my private secretaries, came in. ‘Minister,’ he said. ‘We’ve just heard on the news that Michael Gove has been moved from the Education Department. He’s going to be the new Chief Whip. Nicky Morgan is taking over at Education.’

‘Chief Whip!’ I gasped. ‘That must be Cameron’s idea of a joke. Michael, in charge of party discipline! I cannot think of anyone less well cut out to do that job.’

Michael Gove’s departure from the Education Department took most people by surprise – the media, the Education Department, his colleagues in government and his closest advisers. ‘God, the whole thing is so brutal,’ one of them said to me later. ‘One moment he was there, running the whole show. The next minute he was gone. I went to his office to say goodbye, and I was just told that he wasn’t coming back. All the pictures on the wall of his office were down, and all his personal possessions were boxed up and sitting outside the office. The whole place had been stripped of every memory of him within half an hour of the announcement.’

The word soon went around in government that it was all down to the ‘Lynton Crosby effect’. Apparently the Tory Party campaign chief had found in his opinion polling that Michael Gove was the most unpopular Cabinet minister. He had told the Prime Minister that he wanted a vote winner – a less divisive figure – at Education. And the Prime Minister, now wholly focused on the election, had said yes.

Over the next few days, the story of the surprising and undoubted demonstration gradually came out.

Apparently, at the end of the week before the reshuffle, the Prime Minister asked to see his Education Secretary and close friend. He told him that with the election campaign approaching, he wanted his key ally at the centre of government, closely advising him. The heavy lifting had been done at Education and it was time to move on.

The Education Secretary asked for some time to consider the proposal. He wasn’t particularly keen to move, but felt that maybe he could be of help at the centre of government. And, in any case, it is difficult in politics to say no to a leader when they want to move you and especially when they are your friend. Michael Gove could have refused to move. The Prime Minister

was in no position to sack him. But that was not the relationship Michael wanted to have with his close ally.

So a day or so later, he said yes. Shortly afterwards, he was phoned by George Osborne, who advised him to stay put in Education. 'It's too late, I have already said yes,' replied the outgoing Secretary of State. Afterwards, he may have regretted the decision – not just because it was presented through the media quite explicitly as a demotion, but also because he actually wanted to stay at Education.

Michael Gove's wife, Sarah Vine, publicly signalled her discontent. Dom Cummings was also still a little 'off message', tweeting: 'For many years I have told MG that Cameron's a lightweight, selfish, clown. He didn't want to believe it. Now he knows I'm right. Thanks Dave!'

The Gove demotion may have been the big shock of the reshuffle, but it was not, perhaps, quite as surprising as it seemed. Over the previous nine months, Michael had seemed to be in conflict with just about everyone, from bitter enemies to former close allies.

One senior civil servant said privately: 'Michael has never seemed to be the same person since the government lost the vote on Syria in September 2013.'

It was hoped that the departure of the Education Secretary's combative adviser, Dom Cummings, in early 2014, might lower the temperature. But by removing any restraining influence on Dom himself, it actually had the opposite effect.

Rows between the Education Secretary and Nick Clegg were not unusual, but their frequency and intensity increased markedly from autumn 2013 onwards.

Rows between Michael Gove and other Conservative ministers were not unknown before September 2013, but afterwards they, too, increased in frequency and ferocity. Now Theresa May, Eric Pickles, William Hague, Philip Hammond, Baroness Warsi and other Conservative ministers found themselves clashing with the Education Secretary at different times.

What was equally unusual was that the previously very close relationship with David Cameron also came under strain. The PM and his good friend fell out over issues as varied as capital funding for free school meals, the introduction of a national fair funding policy for schools, whether we should legislate for free school meals, and how many Etonians it ought to take to make a general election manifesto.

David Cameron hated disagreeing with his Education Secretary, and in the early part of the parliament he had more or less contracted education policy out entirely to his trusted lieutenant. But the Prime Minister now thought that his friend was causing too many rows in government, and was beginning to unnecessarily create enemies of former allies.

In late 2013, the Deputy Prime Minister had asked the Cabinet Secretary, Jeremy Heywood, to conduct a review of policies for 16–24-year-olds. The Cabinet Secretary did his best to reach a consensus, but many of his major proposals were blocked by Michael Gove, who disagreed with several of the review's conclusions.

In early 2014, Ofsted was destabilised. Dominic Cummings, whom David Cameron despised, seemed to be running riot. And coalition relations in the department, which had been so strong back in 2013, were now far worse than in any other department.

November 2013, as I have already recorded, had been a very difficult time in the Education Department, with rows over whether we should legislate to guarantee free school meals, invest more in upgrading school kitchens, and switch money from the budget for new school places to the free schools programme.

In the same month, Michael Gove clashed with Eric Pickles at a meeting of the 'Extremism Task Force', chaired by Theresa May. The Education Secretary had already criticised Theresa May and Baroness Warsi in the meeting, before turning on Eric Pickles and his Local Government Department. Mr Pickles was having none of it, and there was a sharp exchange of views.

Shortly afterwards, Nick Clegg had dinner with David Cameron, George Osborne and Danny Alexander. It was a constructive exchange in which the PM seemed to be trying to pave the way for a second coalition with the Liberal Democrats. But the recent rows with the Education Secretary took up much of the discussion.

Nick Clegg later recounted the conversation to me. David Cameron had replied to the Deputy Prime Minister's complaints by saying: 'Look, I understand your frustration over this, Nick. Michael does seem to have gone a bit nuts recently – it's not just about you, though he does seem to have a particular bee in his bonnet about you right now. To be honest, I am being driven around the bend by Michael right now. We know he isn't very popular in the country, and that your party doesn't mind having fights with

him. But it isn't good for the coalition to have all these big spats. Why don't the two of you meet and try to sort it all out?'

In late November, however, it was the Prime Minister who was upset when an unusually serious Michael Gove spoke out at Cabinet to condemn an international agreement on Iran and its nuclear weapons.

And in December, the Prime Minister and Education Secretary clashed again, in private. Michael Gove and I had mutually agreed a new national funding formula, to ensure that all English schools received a fair level of funding for each pupil. For many decades the funding rates had varied across the country, for no obvious or rational reason.

The government had previously pledged to introduce the new funding formula, but now that it had come to the crunch moment, neither David Cameron nor Nick Clegg was very keen to proceed.

David Cameron called the proposal 'Michael's plan to lose me the next election', adding, 'Right plan, wrong time.' The point was that some areas of the country would be getting extra money, but other areas would get nothing and fear future cuts – leaving Labour free to campaign against the proposal in marginal constituencies up and down the country.

I soon realised that the plan was going to be put on ice, and I started working on a more limited proposal to uplift funding in the most deserving areas, in 2015. But Michael Gove wouldn't give up. And he was used to getting his way with the PM.

On Thursday 12 December, the Prime Minister and Education Secretary met in 10 Downing Street to discuss the issue. The meeting took twice as long as expected, and there was soon talk in the Education Department of raised voices and a big row. The Prime Minister put his foot down. Michael Gove was not amused. The national funding formula was now put on hold. Instead, with Michael Gove's support, I introduced an alternative plan for minimum funding levels, which delivered almost £400 million more cash to the underfunded areas.

Towards the end of the month, just before Christmas, Nick Clegg and Michael Gove finally met to see if they could settle their differences. The two men came together in Nick Clegg's office in Dover House. This was one, rare, occasion when private secretaries were not allowed inside the room. The opening atmosphere was strained.

Nick Clegg came straight to the point: 'Listen, Michael, we can be at each

other's throats twenty-four hours a day, if you like. I don't mind that – our voters absolutely hate you. I can see that from the polls. In different ways, we have both become Marmite politicians.'

Nick made clear his present disdain for the Education Secretary and his team, adding: 'I believe that it was your adviser who dragged my wife through the mud over Book Trust...'

Michael Gove interrupted: 'I think I know what happened on that. I can assure you that it had absolutely nothing to do with me.'

'I said your adviser,' responded the Lib Dem leader. 'You are responsible for your adviser. How would you feel if my office attacked your wife?'

The Deputy Prime Minister then listed other areas of frustration, including over free schools meals, the Heywood Review of 16–24-year-old provision, and the raid on the basic need budget to fund more free schools. He also said that he thought the Education Secretary should be more pragmatic over the need for a 'middle tier' to hold failing schools to account.

Michael Gove then responded: 'Nick, I am sorry – genuinely sorry – that we have had these issues in the media. You may want to know that Dominic Cummings, my main adviser, is leaving. I hope that will help lower the temperature. And I understand that it is frustrating for you that there are policy areas where we don't see eye to eye – like careers education and the middle tier. But I think I am entitled to be a little bruised as well. When I was abroad in October, you launched a direct attack on my policies, including on free schools. And I am frankly hurt at the way you and your party are demonising me. You are presenting me as some swivel-eyed ideologue, some sort of mad, profit-obsessed privatiser. That isn't fair. On free school meals, we are much closer than you think. I am not just a supporter of this policy, but I think I was one of the first in government to suggest it. It is true that Dom Cummings is not a big fan, but he will be leaving soon.'

The meeting was a long one. At the end of it, it was hoped that better relations might result between the two men and their advisers.

Before Christmas 2013, there had been one final meeting of the year of the Department for Education board of ministers, senior civil servants, non-executive directors and senior advisers.

When I arrived, a little late, it was clear that Michael Gove – who was chairing the meeting – was not in the best of moods. After he had finished speaking, he asked who else wanted to comment.

From the far end of the table, a scruffy, unshaven figure put up his hand to speak – Dom Cummings.

‘When I first came to this department in 2011, I said we should sack half the staff. I was told it would be impossible and the department would collapse. Well, we have done it, and who actually has noticed? Now I think we need to go even further. We should sack all the incompetent people. There are far too many white men in their middle fifties in this department who are no good.’

At this moment, a lot of white, mid-fifties men around the table looked down at their papers. But Mr Cummings was not finished.

‘They should be sacked and replaced by young women in their twenties and thirties. Oh, and one last thing. We need to stop the stupid initiatives from No. 10 and from Clegg.’ I groaned, loudly.

At the end of the meeting, I walked straight out to go back to my office. Dom Cummings followed me into the lift. There was a moment of silence, and then he said: ‘How are things?’ I replied: ‘They’d be fine, if you would only stop briefing against the policies of this department.’

The lift door opened, and I got out. From behind me, I heard: ‘If people in the Deputy Prime Minister’s Office think I’ve “gone rogue”, they ain’t seen nothing yet. I intend to use my forthcoming freedom over the weeks and months ahead.’

It was not a promising end to the year.

And if people from the Prime Minister downwards hoped that the Education Wars of late 2013 would cease in 2014, they were to be disappointed.

Dom Cummings was as good as his word. Outside the department, he used his position to stir the pot even more violently. He might have thought that he was assisting his old boss, but each intervention angered not only Nick Clegg but the Prime Minister himself.

Of course, as usual, Michael and I did manage to work together productively in a number of areas – including on fairer funding for schools, on implementation of an early years pupil premium, and on accountability.

We also continued reforming qualifications to introduce more stretch and challenge. In February 2014, I took home a set of GCSE papers to check if they were as ‘dumbed down’ as the Education Secretary often claimed. I opened the GCSE Physical Education written paper to read:

Which of the following sports would you be likely to engage in if you were an introvert?

- A. Cheerleader
- B. Volleyball
- C. Cricket
- D. Cross-Country Runner

‘Oh God,’ I thought. ‘We have got work to do.’

But in other policy areas, the clashes brought the two of us into direct confrontation.

In fairness, it was now not only Liberal Democrats who were under occasional assault.

In late January 2014, the Education Secretary understandably wanted to know why the Ministry of Defence was making so little progress in rolling out army cadet units in state schools. Why, he asked, were most of these units still funded only in fee-paying schools? When Philip Hammond, the Defence Secretary, mumbled something about it being important not to damage the recruitment of officers, the Education Secretary bristled with anger. And when junior Defence Minister Anna Soubry came to my office a week later for a meeting on the ‘military ethos’, she was shocked to find the Education Secretary himself arriving halfway through and treating her to a volcanic display of rage about MoD foot dragging: ‘I am sorry, Anna. It is totally unacceptable. How can we justify spending millions subsidising cadet units in private schools when poorer children have to pay themselves or can’t access it? We have got to do something about this.’ Of course, the Education Secretary was absolutely right. But stories soon spread about heated exchanges and bruised egos. This was a man unafraid of making waves.

In March, Michael decided to use a *Financial Times* interview to attack the ‘extraordinary’ number of Old Etonians in and around No. 10 – including the five Old Etonians responsible for writing the next Conservative Party manifesto: Oliver Letwin, Ed Llewellyn, Rupert Harrison (the Chancellor’s adviser), Jo Johnson and of course the Prime Minister himself. It was indeed a striking fact and a powerful point. But it was not one that the Prime Minister could be expected to appreciate.

The first Liberal Democrat/Conservative education row of 2014 was over Ofsted, the schools inspectorate. I was the minister in charge of Ofsted and



I thought that its chair, Baroness Sally Morgan, and the Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, were both doing a good job in tough roles. I also believed strongly in Ofsted independence.

In late January 2014, I was told that – without consulting me – Michael Gove had met Sally Morgan and told her that her term as chair would not be renewed. Baroness Morgan, formerly a senior colleague of Tony Blair, was told that the Conservatives wanted to appoint more of ‘our people’ before the general election. I was very unhappy about this and asked Michael to think again.

At the same time, some Conservatives, including Dom Cummings, were pushing for Sir Michael Wilshaw to be ‘reined in’, or even dismissed from his post. It was true that Sir Michael had a tendency to involve himself in policy debates that fell outside the narrow remit of the Chief Inspector, and that he wanted to be as critical of failing academies and failing free schools as he and the government were of failing local authority schools. The Chief Inspector was concerned that some Conservatives wanted to prevent him from inspecting ‘without fear or favour’, as he had pledged to do. Both he and I wanted Ofsted to be empowered to inspect academy chains, just as it could inspect local authorities. Michael Gove was strongly opposed to this move. Ofsted had also recently completed a number of unfavourable inspections of the new free schools. This was also causing some friction.

But as a man of robust views who had turned around a number of tough and failing secondary schools, Sir Michael was not someone to be bullied. He wanted his organisation to be properly independent of ministers. He was also unhappy at the planned removal of Sally Morgan, suspecting that a new Ofsted chair would be a Conservative supporter who would either rein him in or manoeuvre him out.

I was both unhappy at not being consulted on all this and also worried that Ofsted’s independence could be compromised.

Soon, the whole issue blew up spectacularly. A think tank with close links to the Conservative Party was about to put out a report that was expected to be critical of Ofsted. Sir Michael Wilshaw also heard through the press that Conservative advisers in the Education Department were briefing against him and his organisation. His reaction was both volcanic and public – and on Sunday 26 January the newspapers were full of stories about splits and rows, with the Chief Inspector saying he was ‘displeased, shocked and outraged’.

Rarely, if ever, had there been such a public falling-out between a Chief Inspector and an Education Secretary. The Chief Inspector received some aggressive text messages from the Secretary of State's advisers asking him to be 'on message'. He responded in blunt and uncompromising language.

On Sunday afternoon, a surprised shopper in Selfridges' toy department saw a man who looked very much like the Education Secretary having a blazing row on his mobile phone with someone called 'Sir Michael'. By evening, the encounter was recorded on social media. And yes, it was them.

That night, I spoke to Michael Gove, and pressed him to reconsider moving Baroness Morgan – who was actually a very wise and constructive influence on the Chief Inspector. The Education Secretary promised to 'reflect again, given all that has happened today'.

Meanwhile, ever since Dom Cummings's departure from the department, there had been a poisonous drip-drip-drip of leaks on the free school meals policy. It amounted to a malicious attempt to undermine the policy and to imply that it could not be successfully delivered.

Information was selectively leaked to imply that the policy hadn't been costed properly, or that we had too little capital, or that it hadn't been tested (there had been carefully assessed pilots across England under the previous government) or that there was no policy rationale (it had, in fact, been one of the conclusions of Michael Gove's own School Food Plan), or that the department thought the scheme would fail (it was 'red rated' on the departmental risk list, but then so were free schools and extra school places).

In fact, the policy had been planned thoroughly, it was being delivered effectively, and I was confident that it would be a success. But I was increasingly having to use scarce time dealing with malicious leaks rather than concentrating on a delivery challenge affecting 16,500 schools. I was not amused. Nor could I understand how Michael Gove could be allowing his former adviser to deliberately undermine a policy that he personally professed to support.

A week later, on Friday 31 January, already fed up with the handling of the Ofsted issue, and tired of dealing with snipping and obstructionism over free school meals, I received an email from my private secretary saying that Michael had just publicly announced the removal of Sally Morgan – again, without consulting me. This weekend it was my turn to lose my temper, and do so in direct and public terms.

I awoke on Sunday morning to a series of urgent text messages from Michael Gove. I was so angry I was tempted to ignore them, but eventually I called him back. ‘David,’ he said, sounding a little stressed but trying to stay calm, ‘I am about to go on the *Marr* programme on BBC TV. Scanning today’s papers, I notice that there are one or two stories about how unhappy you are with me over Ofsted. I’m just looking at the front pages of the *Sunday Times*, *The Observer*, the *Independent on Sunday*...’ There was a pause, in which I reflected that our press officer James McGrory must be pursuing his usual, understated approach. ‘...The *Sunday Telegraph*, BBC News online, Sky News ... I’m only guessing, but I think I may get asked a question or two about it on *Marr*.’

We had, calmly, a short and frank discussion. Neither of us was going to give an inch.

Later that year, Sally Morgan left Ofsted. Sir Michael Wilshaw stayed. But the relationship between the Education Secretary and his Chief Inspector was never the same again.

Both Ofsted leaders had been amongst Michael Gove’s greatest allies in delivering educational reform. It seemed to me madness to alienate allies in this way.

David Cameron was angry too. ‘The Prime Minister doesn’t understand why Michael Gove is picking this fight. And he doesn’t want a row about a Tory donor being appointed at Ofsted,’ I was told.

In *The Times* on Monday, there was rare criticism of Michael from Rachel Sylvester: Mr Gove, she said, should stop making enemies of friends and start trying to secure the future of education reform. The *Daily Telegraph* had a cartoon of Michael drifting in a boat in the middle of the sea, having lost both oars.

This was the first time that I had clashed publicly with Michael Gove. On this occasion, there was no ‘Clegg’ aspect to the story.

But the most serious dispute was yet to come.

The simmering row over free schools meals continued, with ever more ludicrous, misleading and downright vicious briefings from Dom Cummings – aimed not only at the policy but at Nick Clegg personally.

I was particularly angry about inaccurate claims that we had raided the budget for new school places to fund extra support for kitchens. In fact, the Conservatives had insisted on raiding the budget for new school places

to fund more free schools. I made clear that I was more than happy for the whole subject to be opened up to a Select Committee inquiry, if that was what the Conservatives wanted. I had a huge job to do to successfully deliver the policy – which I would be personally held to account for. I was not amused to be fighting a rearguard action with Michael's former advisers.

In April the Education Wars broke out again into open and messy public conflict. Knives and food were the triggers.

In April 2014, Chris Grayling, the Justice Secretary, suddenly proposed a new set of higher mandatory minimum sentences. One proposal was for a long prison sentence for anyone caught carrying a knife on more than one occasion.

Many Cabinet members, both Liberal Democrat and Conservative, felt that the proposal was unwise and that sentencing should be left to the judges. Ken Clarke, a former Justice Secretary, strongly held this view, as did Oliver Letwin, privately. The Prime Minister was understood to be rather neutral about the issue – which had nonetheless just become more sensitive after a teacher had been stabbed and killed in a school in Leeds.

As there was no consensus on the issue, it was not put on the agenda of the Home Affairs Committee, chaired by Nick Clegg, for debate. At the end of this meeting, on 30 April, Michael Gove suddenly raised the issue and asked why it was not being debated. Nick Clegg explained that there was no consensus on the issue, and thus it was not down to be debated. He closed the meeting, cutting off Michael's complaint.

Three days later the mini-row was public. Splashed across the front page of the *Daily Mail* was the headline 'Clegg bids to block knife crackdown'. Underneath the headline – in case anyone had missed the point – it said: 'Days after shocking classroom murder of Ann Maguire, Deputy PM and other senior Lib Dems refuse to support tightening the law'. Danny Alexander and I were cited as two Liberal Democrats blocking the proposed change. None of the Conservatives who were opposed were mentioned.

We were all furious – not least at the opportunism of linking the row to the death of a classroom teacher, when there was no evidence that the policy would have made any difference.

Nick Clegg was convinced that Michael Gove or his advisers were guilty of the leak: 'Grayling wouldn't dare.' For a while, we considered asking for a police inquiry into the leak, but we decided against it. The message came

back from David Cameron's office that they were also blaming Michael Gove, who would be given a 'bollocking' by the PM.

A few days later, there were more leaked DfE emails designed to discredit the free school meals policy, and more bile from Dom Cummings, making all sorts of allegations about Liberal Democrat 'lies' over the policy. It went further than anything yet seen.

On Friday morning, 9 May, the media contacted us about more allegations from Dom Cummings. I carefully drafted a statement to go out from the Education Department press office, rebutting the allegations. However, Michael Gove's special adviser refused to clear the statement for release – even though its contents had been approved by the department's Permanent Secretary. I was incandescent, and said that either the statement would be put out from me or it would go from the Deputy Prime Minister's office. Eventually the press release went out from me, but not as an official DfE 'line'. No one in the media noticed, but the coalition rows were now becoming seriously destabilising.

I now sent a private email to Michael, the strongest and most direct that I had written. I asked him to get his friend and ally under control and to stop the leaks.

An hour later, Michael Gove called me back. 'Look,' he said. 'I don't know where to begin. Dom seems to be in a place where he thinks he's helping me. He thinks he knows my interests better than I do. In fact, it's now making our relationship difficult. No. 10 are also upset with me. My views on this are not the same as Dom. But I cannot control him, although I will now try again.'

That Saturday evening, I was in the Odeon Cinema in Guildford, watching a rather bad film. My private secretary called me to say that the DfE press office wanted me to urgently agree some lines to put out to respond to a story that the Sunday newspapers were going to carry. This would reveal that the free schools budget was £800 million overspent, and that the budget for school places had been raided for £400 million by the Conservatives to bail free schools out. It was going to be a big story – the front-page splash in at least three Sunday papers. I was asked to clear the lines to take quickly, as the Tory advisers wanted to brief the papers.

I made clear that the lines suggested were inaccurate, and that I wouldn't clear them. Panic ensued. I must confess that I enjoyed getting revenge for

Friday's Tory antics. Eventually the lines had to go out from Conservative advisers and not the department's press officers.

The next day, the story certainly did run big – 'Gove's "lunatic" £400m raid to rescue his free schools vision' announced *The Observer*. The *Telegraph* ran with 'Michael Gove and David Laws at war over free schools'. David Cameron, himself on the *Marr* programme, was distinctly unamused. He wanted to lead a united coalition government, not a squabbling mess.

On Monday 12 May, the story still rumbled on. There were TV cameras outside my London house and outside the Education Department.

That morning Nick Clegg and the Prime Minister spoke.

'Look,' said Nick Clegg, 'I'm not apologising for the row over free schools. I am sick and tired of what Gove and Cummings are doing on free school meals, on knife crime, and in other areas. And I am sick and tired of the vicious personal attacks. It has to end.'

The Prime Minister said that he understood the concerns, adding that this was exactly why his former press boss, Andy Coulson, had vetoed Dom Cummings working for the government in May 2010. David Cameron said that he had only relented because Michael Gove had been under huge pressure because of early mishandling by the department of the scaling back of the 'building schools for the future' programme, and he had argued strongly that he needed his former adviser to sort the problems out. 'I should have said no,' said the Prime Minister. 'Cummings has a Rasputin-like influence on Michael – and it's all for the worse.'

Nick Clegg phoned to update me on the discussion with the Prime Minister. David Cameron had apparently concluded by saying: 'I have already made clear that if there are more leaks I would bring in the police. But now we have to call a truce. We have to get Michael and David Laws working together again. We have to stop the Education Department from becoming a totally dysfunctional department.'

'It would help if Michael would make clear once and for all what he tells me privately – that he supports free school meals,' said Nick Clegg.

'Fine,' said the Prime Minister. 'Let's get a joint article done between David and Michael then. I am going to call Michael now.'

In the Department for Education, there was concern about the huge breakdown in coalition relations. The Permanent Secretary told me that there had never before been an occasion where the department was unable to put

press lines out from its own press office. ‘You do realise that on Saturday we had to put a line out from the Secretary of State as an individual, and not from the department?’ he said. ‘Of course I know that,’ I said. ‘Just like Friday when my lines weren’t cleared.’

Later in the morning, Michael and I met. We had a blunt discussion, in private, in which we exchanged grievances. I told the Education Secretary that I wanted him to get his former adviser back under control, whether he was still a civil servant or not: ‘I don’t expect Nick Clegg and Dom Cummings to end up best friends or to take annual holidays together, but it’s totally unacceptable to us that he is behaving like this, and we think we are entitled to ask you to stop this nonsense. I know Dom is personally opposed to this policy. Fine. But he must stop making claims that are patently untrue.’ It was clear that the Prime Minister had already spoken to Michael Gove and had instructed him to settle things down. We agreed to do an article for one of the newspapers. After forty minutes, things had calmed back down.

The article was written, after endless amendments and much anguish.

We eventually had to go through the short piece word by word. At the end of the discussion, Michael Gove said:

‘Good. I should say again that I am a passionate supporter of this policy, although not all the issues of implementation.’

I couldn’t let that go. ‘What do you mean, problems about implementation? You haven’t told me before you have any concerns about implementation?’

Michael looked uncomfortable and then said: ‘Well, of course it’s the issue of capital, and whether we really have got the right amount of capital.’

I snapped back: ‘Look, I really don’t understand what the Conservative position is on capital. When it was the Autumn Statement last year, you prevented us from bidding to the Treasury for any capital, but now you seem to be saying we haven’t got enough. What is your position – that we have too much capital or too little?’

Michael replied, ‘Both! We should have bid for more capital, but we need it in a number of areas.’ My mouth dropped open. The two private secretaries next to us shuffled uncomfortably in their chairs.

I felt that there wasn’t much more to say, when the Tory lines of attack were clearly so inconsistent.

On Thursday, our article was published in *The Times*, under the somewhat unconvincing headline ‘We are not at war over free school lunches’.

When the new school year began in September, the policy was a resounding success. There was enough capital and enough revenue, and the overwhelming majority of schools served a hot meal option. And then the media, and Mr Cummings, lost interest.

So the battle over free school meals faded away.

But Michael Gove's battles with fellow Conservative ministers heated up – including a major clash with Theresa May over extremism policy, which overshadowed the Queen's Speech and led to the forced resignation of the Home Secretary's trusted special adviser.

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister now had to deal with some of the same types of vicious attacks that Nick Clegg had experienced.

In mid-June, a profile of Michael Gove in *The Times* was accompanied by direct attacks by Dom Cummings on Ed Llewellyn, the PM's chief of staff ('a sycophant presiding over a shambolic court'), communications director Craig Oliver ('he's just clueless'), and the Prime Minister himself ('a sphinx without a riddle ... bumbles without the slightest sense of purpose').

These words were not appreciated in Downing Street. The criticism was now damaging the PM himself.

Within days, the instruction went out that Dom Cummings was no longer to be allowed to come into the DfE and his pass was to be cancelled.

When Michael was unexpectedly moved from the department in the July 2014 reshuffle, the cover story was that Lynton Crosby was to blame: his polling apparently showed that the Education Secretary was unpopular with both teachers and parents.

But there was more to the surprise move than this. The Prime Minister was fed up with the endless rows. An Education Secretary who had started in office by carefully creating a 'big tent' of supporters for schools improvement, including reform-minded head teachers, modernising Conservatives, Blairite Labour members and some Liberal Democrats, had now ended up in a very small tent indeed. At times, the inhabitants of the tent seemed to be down to just Dom Cummings, Toby Young and Michael himself.

But even more significant were the chaos and division caused by Dom Cummings, and the real anger this provoked in Downing Street.

'I never realised just how much Downing Street hate him and how much damage he did to me,' the former Education Secretary told friends after his move.





With Nicky Morgan now in the Secretary of State's office, the Education Wars of the previous nine months ended abruptly. Peace broke out in the Education Department, and the new Education Secretary and I worked constructively right through until the end of the parliament. We had some differences of view, but not on crucial issues, and these were well managed by Nicky and by her able, constructive and mild-mannered new adviser, Luke Tryl.

It was a relief not to be battling any more with Michael Gove and Dom Cummings. That last nine months had been pretty frustrating at times.

But I also missed my old colleague, and when I reflected back on what he had stood for in government, I had to accept that in spite of our differences, on many issues his passion and motivation were aligned with my own views, even though his policies weren't always as convergent.

Here was the Secretary of State, for example, who had upset many in the education establishment by sweeping away many low-quality 'vocational' qualifications – but wasn't a strong core curriculum what most disadvantaged children needed, to get on in life?

Here was the man who had irritated the Prime Minister by criticising a Conservative manifesto writing process that was to be led by five male Old Etonians and one male graduate of St Paul's. But didn't he have a point?

Here was an Education Secretary who had battled with the Ministry of Defence to make subsidised cadet forces places available in state schools, and not just in the posher independent schools; who had championed gay marriage; who wrote rude letters to Conservative-controlled education authorities telling them to raise the quality of their state schools; who was carrying out a long-overdue improvement in provision for children in care; who had quietly let it be known that he thought the 2012 reduction in the top rate of tax was premature; and who was believed to have told friends that he thought that inheritance tax should be increased and not reduced.

In a Conservative Party that was too often the defender of the interests of those who benefited from the status quo, here was a truly radical advocate of higher standards for all and greater equality of opportunity. Here was a man who quite genuinely wanted to break Britain's class-ridden society open to 'outsiders'.

Michael Gove had been a generous and charming friend, at times a frustrating and formidable foe, a doughty fighter for educational excellence, and a striking example of a politician capable of setting clear aims and objectives and seeing these through.

Two days after Michael left his Education post, one of my advisers wrote to me that ‘Michael has discovered what every politician eventually gets to find out – that all political careers end in failure’.

I wasn’t so sure. I expected my former colleague to be a rather indifferent Chief Whip, but I predicted that if the Conservatives were returned to power in 2015, Michael Gove would be back either as Home Secretary or as Justice Secretary – and perhaps eventually as both. I should have backed my hunch with a small flutter at Ladbrokes.