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Insight Series

## Character Education and the Political Climate

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### Character Education and the political climate.

In recent weeks both Michael Gove (03/02/2014) and Tristram Hunt (12/02/2014) have begun to identify their key policy objectives for the forthcoming election cycle. The speeches made within two weeks of one another contain elements which mirror one another and interestingly highlight character development as a central tenant upon which both of the major political parties intend to build their campaigns. These two speeches stressed the importance of high academic standards and the need for character education within schools, but offered radically different interpretations of the concept.

Michael Gove in a speech entitled [Securing our Children's Future](#) (2014) at the London Academy of Excellence spoke on the need for “excellence and rigour inside the classroom: and just as important, a rich and rounded education beyond it”. These few words form the crux of the Conservative’s approach to character development, that it is a desirable outcome but should not form part of the core school day. Gove went on to describe a school day “9 or 10 hours long” allowing time for extra-curricular activities which would form the primary method of delivery of this ‘character formation’ agenda. The extra-curricular program is very much a behaviourist attitude to character development and is borne out by the speech’s focus on sanctions available to teachers to help maintain good conduct. This approach is unsurprising as the burden of incumbency allows for little flexibility this far into a tenure as a Secretary of State. Gove cannot make character education a direct focus of his campaign as it would require a dramatic repositioning of the party’s education objectives. This position has softened somewhat in recent weeks (see below); however, Gove’s language is still framed by notions of ‘managing behaviour’ and ‘enforcing discipline’. In contrast to Gove’s limited adoption of character education, Tristram Hunt’s speech, [Schooling for the Future](#) (2014), was a more direct endorsement of the concept. A concept framed in language which consistently referred to a “moral purpose” of character education. While reinforcing a commitment to “minimum standards, rigorous assessment and intelligent accountability” Hunt was critical of the threat posed to the “social ethos of schooling” by “the managerial, target-driven performance culture that has permeated our education system in recent years”. Hunt stated that “we should encourage all schools to embed character education and resilience across their curriculum.” The difference between the two standpoints is striking, with much of Hunt’s speech directly countering statements made by Gove. Hunt stated that “this is about learning from the rigorous academic discipline that is character education and implementing a holistic approach that goes beyond extra-curricular activities and into the classroom”. Hunt also suggested that it is not the role of politicians to tell teachers how to do their jobs and that the government must trust to their training, a clear reaction to Gove’s championing of the Teach First programme in his address.

The position taken by the Conservative Party is not a major departure from existing policy ideas; Gove’s commitment to character education is a footnote in a speech which champions their current agenda of free schools and testable academic rigour. However, it is interesting to note in Michael Gove’s speech of March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2014, [The Future of Vocational Education](#), that the previous reference to character education as an addendum to the school day has evolved somewhat. Gove repeatedly made mention to an ‘apartheid’ between academic and vocational education which must be addressed. Suggesting that parity between traditional academic subjects and vocational qualifications would deliver a generation of young people both well-educated and crucially employable. Here the speech began to use the Aristotelian language of character virtues when

referring to the character strengths which must be fostered within school environment. Mr Gove stopped short of suggesting that character education would take a main place within the curriculum, however, activities such as drama, debate and sports, previously referred to as extra-curricular were now referred to as co-curricular. This evolution is systematic in the language used by both political parties and shows that increasing importance of character education within the discourse.

Labour's developing position is a more interesting one; former Shadow Education Secretary Stephen Twigg spoke a number of times during the winter of 2012/13 on the need for a more holistic approach to education. In a speech to [The Independent Academies Association](#) in November 2012 Twigg stated that he agreed with the CBI and Dr Anthony Seldon of Wellington College that young people need more than good grades alone and that "instead of compromising standards, placing a greater role on character development does in fact improve performance – whether that be in attainment, behaviour or in developing more rounded and engaging citizens". Furthermore, in January 2013 in an address to Policy Exchange in which the [Blueprint for One Nation Education](#) was defined Twigg spoke on the need to instil "resilience and character" in young people in order for them to succeed. This was reinforced by an article in *The Spectator* entitled *Schools can teach good character and the 3 Rs*; in which he again championed the ideas of Seldon and rejected what he described as the "false choice presented by Michael Gove" between character and academic attainment. Stephen Twigg's employment of character education in policy was at this stage embryotic and as recently as October 2013, Twigg spoke at the Labour Party Annual Conference, making no mention of character development.

Just over three months later (January 2014) in a speech to the North of England Education Conference, Twigg's successor, Tristram Hunt began hinting at a change in direction. In a section named '*The Future of Teaching*' Hunt briefly spoke on the need for "resilience, character or mindfulness" as educational ideals "returning to vogue". One month later, we arrive at the '*Schooling for the Future*' speech (February 2014), in which character education has developed from the brief mentions in previous policy addresses to the cornerstone of the party's policy. Why then have both main parties begun to look at character development as a desirable educational objective? In answer to this we must look at the rising tide of research and perhaps more importantly media coverage focussing on the benefits of character education. As Hunt mentioned in his speech a "rigorous academic discipline" has emerged around character education, this does not, however, answer the 'why now?' question. The Riots Communities and Victims Panel Report of March 2012 identified a need to engender personal resilience within young people in order to combat the social-disenfranchisement cited as a cause by many of the participants, yet the concept is only coming to the fore nearly two years later. Since the beginning of the financial downturn the political landscape of Europe has shown a marked shift to the right with 'the centre' moving to reflect this. The UK has not been exempt from this and while it cannot be said to be a result of recession alone, the rise of UKIP, now placed third in national polls, as well as continuing support for the Conservative party points to an increase in support for right wing ideas. Ideas like the Labour Party's One Nation and indeed the Big Society concept of the 2010 Conservative manifesto are a reaction to the values rhetoric of parties such as UKIP. This concept of 'national values' or a 'national character' could be a reason behind the concept of character education beginning to gain substantial traction. Tristram Hunt directly referenced this cultural debate in his speech describing a character education with a moral purpose as a means to address "deeper cultural issues" within the United Kingdom.

The work of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values and others such as Dr Anthony Seldon has helped to place character education on the national agenda. With research such as the September 2013 Populus Survey of Parents, commissioned by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values, highlighting an apparent desire for character education to become part of all children's education and the lines in the sand recently drawn by Michael Gove and Tristram Hunt it is likely that character education will be a key battleground in the forthcoming election. While their approaches may differ it is clear that their ideas echo the wider opinion of the British Public.



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*The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues or The University of Birmingham.*

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