

The SNP isn't listening to teachers or parents on education

John Swinney made a big speech on schools last week.

The SNP Education Secretary said the "data" told him that "the status quo was not an option", and then expressed his disappointment that "there is a strong body of opinion that does not accept the need for change and what is perhaps most worrying is that body of opinion is from within Scottish education." Most coverage described this as an attack on the "complacent educational establishment".

In doing so, commentators fell into a double trap. To oppose Mr Swinney's proposed changes to schools is not to oppose any change at all. The overwhelming response to his "Governance review" is that they are the wrong changes.

Secondly, this analysis accepts that the status quo is something John Swinney has stumbled upon. In fact, today's status quo in schools is the legacy of ten years of SNP government.

That status quo is declining budgets, 4,000 fewer teachers, 1,000 fewer support staff, a teacher recruitment crisis, and dysfunctional government bodies (Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority). Yes, change is needed alright. Just not John Swinney's changes. For example, the SNP plans to centralise the setting of school budgets, and create unaccountable "regional boards" for a purpose which it cannot explain, except to say it wants to "strengthen the middle", whatever that means.

In Dunbar, in my constituency, the local primary has over 1,000 pupils, while a few miles away, Stenton school has 19. The idea that a civil servant with a formula knows enough about such diverse schools and the communities they serve to get their budget right is simply laughable. That decision has to be taken locally. What is more, if a head teacher or parent council think the budget is wrong, they can argue their case locally, and they do. Good luck trying that with a faceless bureaucrat in the Scottish Government's offices in Victoria Quay.

When Kezia Dugdale raised this at First Minister's Questions, Nicola Sturgeon was outraged. After all she is devolving £120m of Pupil Equity funding direct to schools. That is true. But the core budget for schools is over £4 billion. Only in the world of the SNP could centralising £4bn and devolving £120m be presented as "all power to the head teachers".

This is not the only “through the looking glass” aspect of the position into which John Swinney has manoeuvred himself. He described his Governance review as “...a vision of empowerment and devolution.” It is full of declarations about teachers and parents “knowing best”.

Mr Swinney’s problem is that the responses to his review from head teachers, teachers, parents and communities almost all reject his reforms, and tell him that what is needed is more resource, along with reform of Education Scotland and the SQA. John Swinney’s speech was clear – he intends to ignore them. They will be empowered, against their better judgement if need be. The Education Secretary is telling head teachers, teachers, and parents that they do not know best – he does.

We should not be surprised. When the Scottish Parliament’s education committee gathered evidence from hundreds of teachers that they had lost any faith in Education Scotland and the SQA, Mr Swinney simply rubbished the committee’s work as statistically invalid. Instead, he said, he would base his views on the teachers he spoke to when he visited schools. Happily, this “balanced sample” seemed very happy with everything he is doing. It is presumably only “bad” teachers and parents who have responded to his governance review with malice aforethought, and he intends to ignore them.

John Swinney loves to talk about how much he respects teachers. As well he might. They are the only thing keeping our schools going through the SNP’s ten years of incompetence and budget cutting. If he won’t listen to them his respect is just empty talk.

The status quo for teachers in Scotland is ten years of under-resourced curricular reform, lower salaries than colleagues in other countries, less preparation time, and the largest classes anywhere in the developed world. Nothing John Swinney is currently proposing will change that status quo, fashioned by him himself over his eight years as finance secretary.

All of this was laid bare in a recent parliamentary debate, where Holyrood defeated the government and passed a motion roundly condemning their handling of education. Last week’s speech tells us that John Swinney is not just ignoring parents and teachers, but parliament too.

That will of parliament, so sacred when it comes to an independence referendum, would seem of no import with regard to our children’s future.

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Iain Gray is Scottish Labour's Education spokesperson. This article originally appeared in the Herald on March 29th 2017