

## The final years of the DfE

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In my book 'The Restless School', first published in 2014, I wrote:

*Walk into the foyer of the Department for Education in London, and there are photos\*\* of all the Secretaries of State for Education since Rab Butler and Ellen Wilkinson in the 1940s; what most of them have in common is their fewer than three-years tenure of office. Many distinguished and fine public servants among them, long-term planning is not in the nature of the office.*

*In my school journey years, the current DfE has also been called: the Ministry of Education; Department of Education and Science; Department for Education; Department for Education and Employment; Department for Education and Skills; and Department for Children, Schools and Families. I do not guess here what other acronyms may befall it, prior to its complete abolition sometime in the late 2020s.*

What are we looking at here? Certainly, since the hyper-active days of Michael Gove as Secretary of State (2010-14), the DfE has drifted aimlessly under ten different leaders, the longest serving of whom was Gavin Williamson at two years, one month and 22 days. Will the current incumbent reach one year?

There are three credible scenarios for the ending of the DfE in its present guise.

### **First: departments of state will merge**

A new era in central government departments is upon us, shaped by the urgent need to fund the defence of the land. Government has recently disclosed 'billions lavished on projects abroad', including £500,000 to supply electric cars to Albanian prisons.

The litany in similar vein is a matter of public record. Yvette Cooper at the Home Office has found evidence of 'excessive spending on contracts handed out to external suppliers'. And John Healey at the MOD noted 'no clear accountability' and 'added complexity where simplicity is needed...no wonder it took an average of six years for a large programme to get underway'.

Which department of state subsumes education?

## Second: the mayors will run education

The deputy prime minister is determined to deliver on devolution and local government reorganisation. The arguments are again about cost-savings - and moving power down to the local level.

Who would bet against Andy Burnham in Manchester, Ben Houchen in Tees Valley, or the soon-to-be-elected mayor of Lincolnshire running education, more efficiently and 'closer to the people'?

## Third: the Department for Young People arrives

With devolution enacted, an advanced multi-academy trust landscape, AI in its pomp, and ever more financial pressures, there may still be a need for some slimmed-down co-ordination at the centre.

Let us propose a Department for Young People (DYP), focused on health, learning and opportunities for the coming generation. The latest figures of close to one million NEETs are a scar, as is the continued neglect of the 'forgotten third'.

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The future of government departments will be measured in their agility and clarity; their demonstrable value for money; their flexibility to respond to very rapid change in society; most of all, their ability to work within a dynamic political landscape of coalition partners.

A Secretary of State for Education, and their team of civil servants, will not be able to drift in the way teachers, leaders, governors and families have watched for the past decade. Their orthodoxies are ripe for changing.

The bureaucratic state must be reinvented.

**\*\*Quiz question: how many of these Secretaries of State can you name?**

