

Charm versus cojones

Michael Gove, Ed Balls, the politics of education and the perils of preferment.



Illustration by Steve O'Brien

Pledges are shrinking to aspirations; aspirations are quietly evaporating; no more hoodies are being hugged or huskies stroked (or was it the other way around?). The sunny Californian Conservatism that David Cameron once espoused has been darkened by the crunch. His promise of a happier tomorrow now hangs on a few upbeat policies. Chief among them is education reform—which could make Michael Gove, the shadow schools secretary, among the most privileged and pressured members of a future Tory government.

Ed Balls, his counterpart in the cabinet, is an equally important figure for Labour, before and after the next general election. Ire over public services often focuses on bad hospitals: death is more heart-wrenching than illiteracy. But pound for pound (and there have been a lot of them), Labour's education spending has been less rewarding than its health splurge. It falls to Mr Balls to defend its record on what Tony Blair proclaimed his main priority—and to soften the recession's impact on teenagers and soothe a rumbling moral panic about harm done by and to children.

So Mr Balls's contest with Mr Gove is pivotal. It also offers a compelling contrast of personalities and attitudes to power.

Balls and the vasectomy

Begin with the similarities. Both men have been MPs only since 2005. Both are ex-journalists. Both are tight with their leaders: as Gordon Brown's chief adviser at the Treasury, Mr Balls was known as the "deputy chancellor"; Mr Gove is close to Mr Cameron personally and, as a member of his "Notting Hill" cabal, geographically. Both are very clever. Each is likeable in his fashion. Mr Gove recently told a mostly Muslim audience that their religious liberty was indivisible from that of homosexuals, and that a society's treatment of Jews was a litmus test of its well-being—but too sweetly to raise hackles. Mr Balls learnt his politics on Mr Brown's long, rancorous march to Number 10; in public he is more a basher than a charmer, and his tribal scorn for the Tories can be wearying. But in private he is engagingly rambunctious.

And both profess roughly the same basic motive: to improve the chances of poor children. When Mr Gove addresses Tory audiences, they sometimes seem impatient for him to skip from his odes to social mobility to the bit about improving discipline. But the two disagree about

how to realise that goal—a disagreement more starkly ideological than many front-bench clashes.

Mr Balls is an egalitarian, who believes the benevolent state can compensate for human failings. These views have guided his stewardship of the super-ministry Mr Brown created for him in 2007, the Department for Children, Schools and Families. He has championed a questionable new qualification meant to boost the prestige of vocational training. He has also, say some, undermined the academies programme—a scheme of Mr Blair's that gives selected schools freedom over their curriculum and staffing—through bureaucratic fiddles. At the least, Mr Balls's vision of academies involves more oversight than Mr Blair's.

Or Mr Gove's. He, by contrast, is an old-fashioned liberal. Though the Blair-worship once rife among Tories is now less fashionable, Mr Gove still describes himself as "Blue Blairite". He likes academies and wants to spread the model to primary schools (an extension the government oddly opposes). He also wants to emulate a Swedish initiative and let charities, churches and others set up state-funded independent schools; in theory these would ginger up existing ones. Like most innovations, Mr Gove's would need financial lubrication for capital costs. There is also a risk that rich kids would benefit disproportionately.

Still, his is the Tories' most radical policy. There is only ever a small economy of genuine ideas in British politics, and this is one of them. Yet it isn't really Tory; Mr Blair was groping towards the Swedish model too. Labour has bizarrely surrendered the idea to Mr Gove. Part of the reason, allege Mr Balls's critics, lies in another contrast between them: the scale of their ambition.

As well as a self-confessed Blairite, Mr Gove is a "neocon", a stance potentially at odds with his leader's humbler and fuzzier global outlook. But despite his roving intellect (rare in a shadow cabinet more plodding than pyrotechnic), and although he impersonates Mr Brown, a fellow Scot, in rehearsals for prime minister's questions, Mr Gove avowedly has no wish to extend his remit and take part in the real thing. He would, he says, have a "leadership vasectomy" if the procedure were available. For his part Mr Balls (who is married to Yvette Cooper, the chief secretary to the Treasury) still occasionally opines on economics: he has talked more frankly than his boss about the severity of the slump and the failure of financial regulation. In his case, this public ranging is matched by an aspiration for a bigger role.

Mr Balls would like to lead the Labour Party. Of course, vaulting ambition is neither unusual nor always unhelpful among ministers. But, according to some, Mr Balls's wish to ingratiate himself with Labour members has swayed his stance on academies and other sensitive issues. He vigorously denies having any such long-term plan or ulterior purpose. Yet whatever its motive, his scepticism about school reform could actually undermine him: he risks being remembered more for scandals over chaotic exams and awful social services than for transformative policies.

And he may anyway be nobbled by his closeness to Mr Brown. Mr Balls rose with his mentor, sharing the credit for Mr Brown's apparent economic alchemy (he was the co-architect of Bank of England independence and of the legendary "five tests" that kept Britain out of the euro). Now he is tarnished by the bust. Mr Gove, meanwhile, is rising towards the cabinet on Mr Cameron's frock-coat tails. Both are proof of an old political rule: patronage is a wonderful thing, and a dangerous one.

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