Logics, rhetoric and 'the blob': Populist logic in the Conservative reforms to English schooling

James Craske*

University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

A lot has been written about the lasting implications of the Conservative reforms to English schooling, particularly changes made by Michael Gove as Education Secretary (2010–2014). There is a lot less work, however, on studying the role that language, strategy and the broader political framework played in the process of instituting and winning consent for these reforms. Studying these factors is important for ensuring that any changes to education and schooling are not read in isolation from their political context. Speeches particularly capture moments where intellectual and strategic political traditions meet, helping us to form a richer understanding of the motives behind specific reform goals and where they fit into a political landscape. This article analyses speeches and policy documents from prominent politicians who led the Conservative education agenda between 2010–2014 to illustrate how politicians mobilised a deliberate populist strategy and argumentation to achieve specific educational goals, but which have had broader social and political implications. Concepts from interpretive political studies are used to develop a case analysis of changes to teacher training provision and curriculum reform, illustrating how politicians constructed a frontier between 'the people' (commonly teachers or parents) and an illegitimate 'elite' (an educational establishment) that opposed change. This anti-elite populist rhetoric, arguably first tested in the Department for Education, has now become instituted more widely in our current British politics.

Keywords: education reform; populism; rhetoric; logics

Introduction

The scope of change in English schooling has been substantial since the Conservative Party regained power in 2010. In the first 3 years of David Cameron's administration, few policy areas were left untouched. This article adds to a growing number of readings that have attempted to 'make sense' of the politics of the Conservative education reforms. Amongst these are Sonia Exley and Stephen Ball's early discussion on the continuities and discontinuities with New Labour (Exley & Ball, 2011), Ken Jones' focus on the 'Gove programme' articulated within its twin peaks of neoliberalism and cultural conservatism (Jones, 2013), learnings from the politics of academisation (Rayner *et al.*, 2018) and of curriculum and cultural literacy (Yandell, 2017). Firstly, the article lays out some context to key political actors studied and the reform changes

*Corresponding author: Centre for Competition Policy, 0.35 Earlham Hall, Norwich NR7 TJ, UK.
Email: j.craske@uea.ac.uk

in English schooling. From there, it draws out some key concepts from the British political interpretive tradition, notably the use of logics of critical explanation, political rhetorical theory and a particular interpretation of populism. This is all used to provide a broad reading of the Conservative reforms and two policy case studies specifically (curriculum changes and teacher training provision).

This article ostensibly analyses political language to situate the vast array of Conservative policy objectives as a distinctive programme for English schooling, by focusing predominantly on how the reforms were argued for. Conservative politicians readily drew on an 'elite/popular antagonism', situating the reforms within a populist frame, which constituted their attempt to reorganise the social imaginary of educational thinking and its direction in ways that would not be achievable (let alone thinkable) drawn from a non-populist agenda. This article draws out how education reform was also tied to much bigger ideas about the function that Whitehall (home to the UK civil service and government departments) plays in policy creation and delivery, as well as the relationship schools and teachers might have with institutions such as Local Educational Authorities (LEAs).

The article has its foundations in a 3-year funded doctorate (2015–2018) that, in part, sought to develop a theoretically informed but empirically grounded reading of the Conservative education policy worldview over the past decade. It builds on this work to consider the role and function that populist reasoning has had, in both organisationally and rhetorically instituting the Conservative 'worldview' posited by Michael Gove during his tenure as Education Secretary (2010–2014), whilst marginalising alternative visions of schooling and teaching. Politicians and proponents of the Conservative education reforms have rhetorically situated them within an apolitical, evidence-driven and 'what works' frame. This article contends that, on the contrary, Conservative politicians have readily drawn on a populist argumentation to institute and legitimise their reforms within English schooling discourse and to restore and rectify grievances and disgruntlements that Tory politicians share about perceived 'cultural decay', declining rigour in the school system and so-called 'progressivism'.

Policy context, theory and methodology

Firstly, the article lays out some context to key political actors studied and the reform changes in English schooling. From there, it draws out some key concepts from the British political interpretive tradition, notably the use of logics of critical explanation, political rhetorical theory and a particular interpretation of populism. This is all used to provide a broad reading of the Conservative reforms and two policy case studies specifically (curriculum changes and teacher training provision). I pay attention to the series of tropes and arguments found in a corpus of 58 speeches made by Conservative politicians (2009–2018), debates in Parliament, the two Education White Papers published since 2010, as well as publicly available correspondence. Coding and analysis of these speeches identified a series of recurring themes, such as the prioritisation and synthesis of outcome-based evaluation, knowledge, autonomy, core curriculum and social justice.

Drawing on concepts from political rhetorical theory (Finalyson & Martin, 2008; Atkins, 2010; Charteris-Black, 2011; Turnbull, 2017) and the logics approach of critical explanation (Glynos & Howarth, 2007), I study tropological connections made between these concepts and political argumentation to articulate a 'critical interpretation' of the Conservative reforms (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 191). Critical interpretation in this article centres on identifying the dominant logics and political strategies, interpreting them and in some cases contesting this by showing that any imposition of a government programme is only one of many possible options available (p. 193). This is important; studying political language demonstrates how governments close down alternative viewpoints whilst attempting to institute their own. The use of policy in this article refers to a programme, plan, strategy or individual politician (Wiesner *et al.*, 2017, p. 143), though from a broader theoretical angle, Carol Bacchi's 'policy-as-discourse' approach points to policy as a 'strategic and political process' (Bacchi, 2000, p. 50). The former signals concrete entities in the political arena, whereas Bacchi's version opens up the definition of policy to logics and the symbolic utilised to construct and shape political arguments.

The UK education policy landscape has changed substantially over the past decade. For instance, the Conservative-led government substantially extended the academies programme started under New Labour (1997–2010), within just a couple of months of being in office. Academies and free schools are publicly funded but operate outside of the control of local authorities. They have more control over their curriculum, teacher salaries and conditions and finance. The scrutiny and monitoring role that LEAs had over such things has continued to decline as more Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) have taken on schools across different districts. Importantly, these schools and academy chains have been proactive in training teachers 'on the job' through programmes such as *Teach First* and *Schools Direct*, and side-lining the role that university departments have previously had in providing this provision. Moreover, in 2013, the Conservatives made sweeping reforms to the school curriculum, arguing for knowledge-rich content to organise the curriculum. This has been underpinned by American academics such as E. D. Hirsch, Daniel Willingham and Doug Lemov, and disseminated by some like-minded academy headteachers and a highly engaged network of 'teacher-researchers', often via social media. Hirsch in particular has been taken up by many free schools and MATs, and helped shape the National Curriculum.

Analytical resources: Logics and political rhetorical theory

The analysis in this article draws on the logics of critical explanation approach (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). This approach connects Ernesto Laclau and Chantel Mouffe's social ontology (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014) with tools to develop an analysis of concrete cases (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 165). Logics draws on three distinct interpretive registers—*social*, *political* and *fantasmatic*—that characterise governing practices and regimes within a particular programme of government. An analyst can pay attention to both the *self-interpretations* of key subjects such as politicians (*social logics*) and their strategies to contest and institute social practices and regimes through speeches and tactics (*political* and *fantasmatic*). This study draws specifically on

political and *fantasmatic* logics to help flesh out how populist reason is instituted as a rhetorical tactic, including how 'norms, roles and narratives' can 'render practices possible, intelligible and vulnerable to contestation' (Glynos *et al.*, 2015, p. 395).

If *social logics* delineates stable patterns and norms that make up 'a particular social practice or regime' of a programme (such as the way financialisation embodied Thatcherism) (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 137), then *political logics* refers to a diachronic axis, where social agents collectively 'mobilise', 'contest', 'defend' or 'transform' social logics through rhetorical or organisational strategies. By constructing 'equivalential chains', actors can simplify social relations by bringing together different components about a common political 'enemy' (e.g. us vs. them) (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 143). Alternatively, by drawing attention to 'difference' within social relations, it is possible to point to how the signifying space can be expanded and complexified (e.g. pioneering vs. average teachers) (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 144). Finally, *fantasmatic logics* explains why subjects can be 'gripped' by specific regimes, even when it is against their interests to be so (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 5). Assuming political reality is symbolically produced through metaphor (equivalence) and metonymic (difference) processes, there is a need to account for the 'force' that holds these together (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 145). Fantasy works here as ideology by masking the contingent nature of social and political reality (shutting down alternative views), drawing on either *beautific narratives* that point to a 'fullness-to-come' if a named object can be overcome or a *horrific narrative* warning of 'disaster-to-come' should an obstacle prove 'insurmountable' (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 147).

Political rhetorical theory provides some explanatory potential by studying the political language of tropes, the role of metaphor and metonyms, to show how tropological arrangements are formed through debate and argumentation for specific purposes. Taking speech seriously gives the analyst more branches for inquiry, including the ideology and beliefs a political actor holds as well as the strategic action they pursue. Though often underestimated in rationalist accounts of policy analysis, studying political speech can pick up the 'traces, elements and dimensions of political activity' related to, or embedded in, a text (Wiesner *et al.*, 2017, p. 60). The political argument, in particular, constitutes 'active and persuasive' aspects of ideology as the 'outward-facing expressions, responses to events, defences against attack and attempts to win the assent or consent of those not already thinking within the ideology in question' (Finlayson, 2012, p. 758). Unlike other accounts of politics, 'rhetoric is dynamic and aimed at changing reality' (Turnbull, 2017, p. 116). We find examples of logics at work in the use of political language, particularly as they seek to map out, institute and transform ideas into action. As noted, social logics can be thought about as the stable patterns formed from practices and ideas *articulated* from a subject's self-interpretations (political traditions such as liberal conservativism or 'Blairism', for example), but it is *political logics* that utilises the 'grounded rhetorical tropes' that construct equivalences and differences between 'elements, groups and individuals' (Glynos *et al.*, 2015, p. 395), embodying 'semiotic conditions' but also ultimately 'political action' (Finlayson, 2012, p. 758). *Fantasmatic logics* draws from desire-based narratives constructed by speakers around ideals and obstacles that can facilitate 'resumption or transformation' of familiar patterns (Glynos *et al.*, 2015, p. 395). The next

part of the article outlines how Conservative politicians instituted populist logics to justify and win consent for sweeping educational change.

Populism in the Department for Education

Defining populism

Much literature has been written trying to explain the term 'populism'. Jan Werner Müller describes populism as 'a particular moralistic imagination of politics', that pits an 'ultimately fictional—people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior' (Müller, 2017, pp. 21–22). Ben Stanley (2008) has described it as a 'thin ideology' that must cohabit with several other ideologies to answer all the questions society has, given populism's limitations for doing such a thing. Such approaches, however, rest on the assumption that a politician holds a populist belief system that 'underlies' their actions (De Cleen *et al.*, 2018, p. 652). Instead, in this article, populism is understood through the discourse-theoretical approach articulated by Ernesto Laclau that reorients it away from the tendency to see it 'as a set of ideas about politics and society' but rather how the contents of populism (the demands, ideologies and grievances of speakers) are articulated as a strategy for achieving political goals. What is significant here is not just identifying that an 'elite/popular' dichotomy is present but that it acquires 'different meaning and normative inflections depending on the context within which it appears' (De Cleen *et al.*, 2018, p. 651).

To develop some analytical clarity on particular cases, one must carefully consider how the concept is 'invoked, by whom and to what purpose and [performative] effect [s]' (De Cleen *et al.*, 2018, p. 649). Populism can be deployed as a strategy to achieve political ends, even though the speakers do not necessarily remain populist once these ends have been achieved. Populist reasoning is regularly argued through non-populist elements. De Cleen *et al.* (2018, p. 99) argue that populist politics embodies 'an articulatory system' where 'elements (grievances, demands, identities, etc. can have as their source any number of ideologies)'. We see this in arguments made by prominent politicians in the Conservative reforms—drawing on resources widely, but using very specific attacks to legitimise and institute policy changes.

Intellectual underpinnings of the Conservative school reforms

Studying materials from party and politician speeches can provide a window into the ideas and beliefs that make up a government programme and individual politicians. There has been work theorising 'Cameronism' (Kerr *et al.*, 2011), referring to David Cameron's rebranding of Conservatism to seek power. Phillip Blond worked with Cameron in opposition through his think tank *ResPublica*, which articulated the idea of 'red Toryism' and policy ideas such as the Big Society. In 2012, Blond reflected on how the Cameron premiership had deferred its vision of Conservatism: 'departments have permission to run with whatever variant of conservatism any minister finds persuasive' (Blond, 2012). Therefore, Michael Gove (as a political actor pursuing an intellectual programme) is *the* key figure for understanding the type of conservatism

that underpins the education reforms. Gove particularly (alongside his special advisor Dominic Cummings) had substantial control over the content and strategy of the reforms to education. The Lib Dems had made an impact with the inclusion of Pupil Premium policy (an extra payment to schools for their disadvantaged pupils), but overall Gove had formed a tight grip on the content and strategy of the reforms to curriculum, pedagogy and teacher training.

Rhetoricians will regularly point to the role of *ethos*, which refers to the values and 'moral credibility of an orator' (Charteris-Black, 2011, p. 7). Gove has been very open about his background and regularly combines his political goals with his journey into Conservatism, being an adopted child (Gove, 2011c) and his intellectual influences (Gove, 2013a). Ken Jones (2013) has provided a good portrait of Gove's intellectual influences, which are taken from the twin peaks of cultural conservatism and neoliberalism. Much of this background ties into his 'impatience' about instituting reforms: 'we must not allow the pace of our reform programme to slacken. Why we must not succumb to what Martin Luther King called the tranquilising drug of gradualism' (Gove, 2013f). David Laws, the Liberal Democrat Schools Minister (2012–2015), noted how Cameron supposedly quipped about Michael Gove to Nick Clegg: 'what you've got to remember about Michael is he is basically a bit of a Maoist—he believes the world makes progress through a process of creative destruction' (Laws, 2017). David Gillborn has characterised Gove as 'impatient with the protocols of modern bureaucracy, dismissive of social partnership and disdainful of professional opinion' (Gillborn, 2016). Not surprisingly, we have seen these aspects of urgency in the strategy of instituting and disseminating the reforms.

With the Conservative education programme, its intellectual underpinning first draws on several other political traditions when substantiating key reform concepts such as 'core knowledge' and 'professional autonomy'. For instance, Nick Gibb has drawn on the nineteenth-century cultural critic Matthew Arnold to argue that cultural education can unleash 'sweetness and light' (Gibb, 2015c). Moreover, the social justice case for passing on knowledge is one of Oakshottian inheritance (Gove, 2009), and teacher autonomy is derived from a Millean liberal tradition where the state provides funds and 'sets high standards' but delegates the 'day-to-day learning' (Gove, 2011b). Gibb has spoken about the 'fruits of [school] autonomy', which finds inspiration in Victorian constitutionalist Walter Bagehot's dictum that policies cannot be 'suddenly made' but need to 'grow' (Gibb, 2015b). There are also the neoliberal managerialism and New Labour deliverology models that the Cameron government quickly adopted, despite being opposed to them in opposition. Reflecting on curriculum changes, Gibb has commented: 'the brains were clearly Michael Gove who went to Sweden to see the free school programme and that's what drove it. But wanting to address the ideology has been my driving force' (Gibb, 2018).

Gove's disgruntlement about the state of education comes from his perception that the spread of knowledge has been 'undermined, over-complicated and all too twisted out of shape' by 'structuralism, relativism and post-modernism' (Gove, 2011b). He laments that 'it was an automatic assumption of my predecessors in Cabinet Office that the education they had enjoyed, the culture they had benefitted from, the literature they had read, the history they had grown up learning were all worth knowing' (Gove, 2011b). This broader statement is tied to the intensified 'standards' debate,

which comes from his worry about cultural decay and lack of rigour in curriculum and assessment. For Nick Gibb, it is his experience of schooling, so often ruined by progressive ideologies in teaching—something that reached its apotheosis with New Labour's 2007 curriculum's focus on skills at the expense of 'teaching the quantum of knowledge' (Gibb, 2018). He recalls the 'absurd lesson' in geography when he was asked to justify where to put a capital city on a 'blank, made-up island', as well as another lesson where he was told to make the mess of wires, batteries and bulbs he was given, work (Gibb, 2018). At its heart, these arguments signal a conservative impulse to restore people and things to their rightful place: teachers at the centre of the classroom, rigour restored in institutions such as Whitehall and universities.

The shared populist logic emanating from Gove and Gibb's interventions is articulated through where they place the blame for their dissatisfaction. Gove has argued that we must reclaim the space of knowledge by being more 'demanding of our education system, demanding of academics, headteachers, professionals in school and students of all ages' (Gove, 2011b). The reforms have been directly opposed to specific individuals and particular institutions, such as LEAs, unions, university lecturers and the 'quangocrats' (Peal, 2015, p. 8) and their embodied values, histories, localised knowledge, ideals and ways of working. Critics of his reform or schools that reject the offer of autonomy (through forced academy conversions) are said to be subscribing to the 'bigoted backward bankrupt ideology of a left-wing establishment that perpetuates division and denies opportunity' (Gove, 2012d). The force and 'grip' of populist argumentation (fantasmatic logics) is fundamental to the coherence of the Gove reforms. Robert Peal, a history teacher who was regularly quoted in Gove's speeches as a friendly ally, quips by recalling the former Conservative Higher Education Minister George Walden: reforming education was like 'trying to disperse fog with a hand grenade: after the flash and the explosion, the fog creeps back' (Peal, 2015, p. 8). This perceived fear of permanent progressivism was present in the language accompanying the reforms.

Although this section has argued that to understand these education reforms, more focus must be placed on figures in the Department for Education (DfE), there were signs of confluence when David Cameron talked (whilst in opposition) about removing the quangos on so-called 'curriculum development', costing 'hundreds of millions': 'like every other parent with a child at a state school I want to say: This is my child, it's my money, give it to my headteacher instead of wasting it in Whitehall' (Cameron, 2009). From the perspective of political rhetoric, conference speeches are regularly constructed with multiple authorship of advisors and speechwriters and are less likely to be just the self-interpretations of a single actor, and therefore offer a more stable insight into the broader Conservative programme (Finlayson & Martin, 2008). A conference speech such as Cameron's acts as a centrepiece for political thinking and 'actualises the political map, frames ideological debates and clarifies the positions of competing teams' (Faucher-King, 2005, p. 11). It has in mind a broader audience and articulates a vision for education and government where money is saved but standards rise. The next section focuses a little more on the role that other political actors played in implementing the Conservative reforms.

Conservative political strategy

Studying the arguments of political actors has been likened to 'identifying the "strategic" dimension of politics' (Finlayson & Martin, 2008, p. 450). With the Conservative education programme, the positive arguments for what should be instituted only made sense against what needed to go (a no-compromise approach). A strategy can be adopted by a party or individual because it can offer the best available way of undermining the argument of an opponent as well as because it is logically and/or culturally consistent with the party's ideological commitment (Atkins, 2010, p. 410). Both elements appear in the way Gove and Gibb justify why the reforms are needed. Populist reasoning in the Conservative education programme is most notably present in the way the reforms have drawn frontiers between groups (such as unions and parents) for achieving political goals. On curriculum, pedagogy and teacher training provision policies, without totally vanquishing the social-democratic model of equality and progress made since the 1960s, there was no room for the emergence of 'social justice' ends delivered by conservative means of traditional knowledge (Gove, 2013a). Without taking on Ofsted's 'reign of error' about progressive teaching methods (Gibb, 2015d), traditional, direct instruction will just be drowned out by an all-powerful establishment shackled to progressivism (Gove, 2013e).

The two examples this article draws on—curriculum and teacher provision—attempt to show how argumentation (using political and fantasmatic logics) was utilised to institute and drive through the government's aims. Driving through reform, however, often relies on a disciplined messaging (e.g. 'take back control' or 'get Brexit done'), and politicians will rely on others within the machinery of government to help win the public consent by constructing speeches or tactics. Political actors can include advisors, motivated groups on the frontline, as well as think tanks. Many of the strategies that were adopted during Gove's tenure as Education Secretary have resurfaced again during the Brexit referendum and the 2019 General Election, providing a pattern to study. Much attention has now been paid to Dominic Cummings, who acted as Gove's special advisor whilst he was at the DfE and has played an incisive leadership role in the Brexit referendum, and at the time of writing is Boris Johnson's special advisor.

Fiona Miller (2019) points out that the architects of Brexit (Cummings and Gove) had honed their 'dark arts' in the DfE, describing how Twitter (she refers to the now-defunct @toryeducation, thought to have had input from those close to the centre of government, if not Cummings himself) was used as a medium to attack critics, public servants and 'trash journalists' whilst promoting the Gove programme. Tropes such as 'enemies of promise' and 'Marxist teachers' in the *Daily Mail* (Gove, 2013b) sat alongside long intellectual speeches on liberal education at Cambridge University (Gove, 2011b). At times, tropes about 'militant activists in the teaching unions' made their way into speeches to events with headteachers (Gove, 2013c). David Cameron's (2009) conference speech provided some early indication through his attack on bureaucrats and quangos, and we have seen this blossom into a more comprehensive populist ideology of anti-liberalism and nationalism. The construction of an anti-elite agenda has been instrumental in winning public consent in referenda and general elections (e.g. political logics such as people vs. politicians, 'London bubble').

As Newman and Clarke (2018) have pointed out, the populist discourses of Brexit helped 'unlock apparently settled configurations of knowledge and power by offering distinctive representations of expertise', particularly *embodied authority* which was 'being held in the wrong sorts of people such as global elites and state institutions' (p. 44). There is some prior confluence here in the Tory education strategy to attack settled notions of expertise by trying to bring authority to the teaching profession and away from Whitehall, primarily through data-driven methods from the frontline that create feedback loops to inform pedagogic practices. Dominic Cummings wanted (and still wants) to radically reform institutions such as the civil service: he talks about the way young people (aged 16–25) are 'forced into dysfunctional institutions' and made to 'conform to the patterns set by middle-aged mediocrities' (Cummings, 2013, p. 4). Reforms to education were a starting point to attack universities, LEAs and bureaucrats. This theme continues to characterise Gove and Cummings in power at the time of writing, as articulated in Gove's (2020) speech about the need for fundamental reform to the civil service: 'to move to a system where those who propose the innovative, the different, the challenging, are given room to progress and, if necessary, fail'.

In the next part of the article I will work through two key policy areas, tying together the rhetorical strategies drawn on by Conservative politicians. The first of these cases deals with teacher training provision (who should control it) and the second refers to the curriculum reforms.

Case 1: Controlling teacher training provision

The Conservative reforms have intervened in the organisation of teacher training in several ways. Most prominently, this has been through reorganising training provision by moving it from universities to schools. In 2013–14, 21% of teachers were trained in schools (DfE, 2014), compared to 53% in 2017–18 (DfE, 2017). Moving teacher training to an increasingly school-led system offers 'the best schools and leaders control [over] which teachers are recruited and how they are trained' (DfE, 2016, p. 24), and allows schools to have a 'greater say in shaping what teachers learn' (Gove, 2011a).

Laclau's (2007) populism studies how tropes organise social space in an ontological manner (through *equivalence* and *difference*), and by showing how grievances are articulated by political actors. Constructing 'chains of equivalence' is characterised by its attempt to simplify the political space by drawing up equivalences between various components and identities of a social group (like the teaching profession), concerning a common 'enemy' (such as unions or university departments) (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 144). Conservative politicians deploy this tactic through the way they frame themselves and their reforms on the side of the majority of teachers, but always against something else. This 'chain' is not merely something all teachers have in common, but it is constructed through politicians claiming a whole group is being 'frustrated and endangered' by an elite (De Cleen *et al.*, 2018, p. 652). In the Conservative reforms, this 'elite' is articulated as those who have traditionally been embedded in providing teacher provision and support, such as unions who provide local knowledge about specific schools through reps, university departments and

LEAs. A great deal of rhetorical work is used to discredit the contribution of traditional partners and providers of teacher education, to get more graduates learning whilst working in a school.

A number of powerful metaphors are used to embolden teachers and the majority of the teaching profession as 'professionals not labourers' (Gove, 2013c), 'candles of our nation' (Gibb, 2016b), as being the 'best young generation of teachers ever' (Gove, 2013d). In so doing, Conservative politicians have tried to draw on *political logics* by building an equivalential chain across the profession. Gove has borrowed from the Romantics, describing teachers as the 'unacknowledged legislators of the world' (Gove, 2013e). In constructing a truly populist logic, however, this discourse is shaped significantly by its hostility to the 'enemies of promise' who take on the role of 'the elite' in the Conservative programme. These are the liberals, leftists, professionals and progressives without which the Conservative programme does not cohere. For many Conservative politicians, part of the fantasy comes from constructing an all-powerful enemy that needs conquering:

> School reformers in the past often complained about what was called The Blob – the network of educational gurus in and around our universities who praised each others' research, sat on committees that drafted politically correct curricula, drew gifted young teachers away from their vocation and instead directed them towards ideologically driven theory.

> We have abolished the quangos they controlled. We have given a majority of secondary schools academy status so they are free from the influence of The Blob's allies in local government. We are moving teacher training away from university departments and into our best schools. And we are reforming our curriculum and exams to restore the rigour they abandoned. (Gove, 2013b)

The justification for academisation and shifting teacher training from universities to schools has been articulated through Gove's 'positive' belief that Millean-style liberty allows individuals to flourish, but also against the 'critics and cynics' for whom he wants to defend teachers (Gove, 2013e). This tactic draws a frontier between a supposed majority of teachers and a common enemy signified by reference to 'the blob', 'hell-bent' on stopping reforms that will help 'great heads' and 'outstanding teachers' (Gove, 2013b) to get on with what 'they do best – teach' (Gove, 2013e). There is a conspiratorial alignment between progressives sitting on LEA committees, university departments and the quangos that they control. The anti-professional and anti-bureaucrat argument lays the groundwork for marginalising professionals and bureaucrats (who were also being squeezed of funding because of austerity), who will lose control as more responsibility is given to schools and headteachers. Gove's attack on the 'enemies of promise' in the *Daily Mail* (Gove, 2013b) takes on an aggressive tone that relies on familiar emotive imagery and tropes rather than the specific idiosyncrasies that arise from arguments that articulate some fundamental battle between skills and knowledge.

Gove's *fantasmatic* appeal is deployed in a national right-wing newspaper as a deliberate political strategy to win the ideological argument with the general public. For a *fantasmatic* appeal to be effective, it must 'embody the general public's view, or at least the relevant audience's view' (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 147). When Gove

writes in the *Daily Mail* that 'you have to take sides', he is appealing to both teachers and parents who have a vested interest in whether schools strike, for instance, and where public opinion might lie (Gove, 2013b). Such work is formulated as a 'horrific' fantasy, which 'foretells of disaster if the obstacle proves insurmountable' (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 147). Not overcoming these obstacles to instituting reform will lead to the teaching profession being shackled to the ideologues who draw 'gifted young teachers from their profession' and have held children back from achieving (Gove, 2013b). The effectiveness of such a strategy is to deny contingency in the debate and to posit one kind of tropological arrangement as 'more authentic or ethical than others' (Glynos, 2001, p. 199). For Gove, this attack on the profession comes from the unions who have opposed his reforms. He marginalises their presence by referring to the 'tiny, but vocal, group of militant activists in the teaching unions' who are not in sync with the majority of teachers who 'aren't interested in turning back the clock, working to rule or engaging in a political showdown' (Gove, 2013c).

Through programmes such as *Teach First*, the 'common sense' of teachers and schools is freed from 'ideologues' who oppose phonics and direct instruction: 'what you and I would call teaching' (Gove, 2013e). In contrast to simplification, Gove and Gibb have also complexified the chain of teachers by dividing the profession into ordinary teachers and the 'pioneers' (the vanguard) of teacher bloggers and tweeters (a select number of headteachers, edu-bloggers and grassroots activists) who are now taking on the 'worthies up high' (Gibb, 2015d). Through the introduction of a differential political logic in Conservative politicians' speeches, their excellence is separated from the less 'sanguine' teachers working day-to-day (Gove, 2013e). These individuals are often referred to by name and are distinguished by the signifier of 'pioneer'. Former teachers such as Tom Bennett, Robert Peal, Andrew Old, Tom Sherrington, Joe Kirby, Kris Boulton and Daisy Christodoulou are the 'biggest names in contemporary education' driving the education debate (Gove, 2011a) and 'pioneering educational research and creating a living base' (Gove, 2013e). This repetition over many speeches has helped provide added legitimacy to specific individuals who can drive the government's agenda forward. Their blogs have added 'reliable information' to combat Whitehall's dysfunction (Dominic Cummings, cited in Old, 2015, p. 56).

Case 2: Curriculum and knowledge

The concept of a knowledge-rich curriculum has been central to the Conservative programme, finding its basis in E. D Hirsch and Daniel Willingham's work. Gibb and Gove have both defended it against those (including fellow Conservatives) that have 'a bias against knowledge' (Gove, 2012d). For instance, during one speech, Gove challenges the inventor James Dyson's comments that studying poetry was a 'self-indulgent' and 'useless exercise' (Gove, 2012d). For Gove, a subject such as English literature finds its place in a liberal corpus with maths, science and art, and introduces children to the 'highest expressions of human thought and creativity: education as a "good in itself – beyond – indeed above – any economic, social and political use [to] which it might be put"' (Gove, 2012d):

> And even apparently frivolous exercises – like the study of French lesbian poetry – can develop the mind in a way every bit as rigorous and useful as any other study. Not, of course, if the study of these tests are faddish exercises in rehearsing sexual politics. But if the study of poetry occurs within the discipline of proper literary criticism, with an understanding of metre and rhythm, an appreciation of the difference between sonnet and villanelle and a knowledge of the canon so we know where influences arose and how influences spread then there are few nobler pursuits. (Gove, 2012d)

In this example, through the objects of the curriculum, Gove frames studying poetry away from politics as 'proper literary criticism' and grasping concepts. The concept of knowledge plays a crucial role in tying together the various political traditions that have constituted thinking in the Tory party, namely cultural conservatism and neoliberalism. On the one hand, there is an ongoing concern about cultural decay: too many pupils talking about 'Tinie Tempah, or Simon Cowell – rather than encouraging the child to thirst after the knowledge of the teacher' (Gove, 2013e). On the other hand, impugning the skills and creativity movement, school ministers 'underestimate the importance of knowledge at [their] peril' when trying to find an 'optimal mixture' of 'knowledge, attitudes and character traits' to produce an 'enterprising and entrepreneurial population' (Gibb, 2016a). Gove has drawn on a *fantasmatic* register to situate the concept of 'knowledge' as an object tied to potential salvation and disaster. Knowledge, conceived correctly, provides teachers with the confidence to know they are teaching effectively (Gove, 2010). Failing in this task, however, is tantamount to 'stealing from [pupils] their rightful inheritance, condemning them to a future poorer than they deserve' (Gove, 2011b). After all, if pupils are not agile in a competitive global economy, 'the consequences of globalisation for those without qualifications are truly ugly' (Gove, 2011b).

In contemporary Conservative policy thinking, there is a vital connection formed between a traditional 'knowledge-rich' curriculum—utilising the trope of 'what works'—and appeals to social justice. As the right-leaning think tank *Policy Exchange* explains to its readers: 'a traditional, academic approach is the best way to raise standards in schools, and eventually achieve social justice' (Porter & Simons, 2015, p. 8):

> We may not all be able to inherit good looks or great houses, but all of us are heir to the amazing intellectual achievements of our ancestors. We can all marvel at the genius of Pythagoras, or Wagner, share in the brilliance of Shakespeare or Newton, delve deeper into the mysteries of human nature through Balzac or Pinker, by taking the trouble to be educated... I believe that denying any child access to that amazing legacy, that treasure-house of wonder, delight, stimulation and enchantment by failing to educate them to the utmost of their abilities is as great a crime as raiding their parents' bank accounts – you are stealing from their rightful inheritance, condemning them to a future poorer than they deserve. (Gove, 2011)

The main turn in this piece is the connection between coherent and 'pure' bodies of knowledge and the delivery of a particular conception of social justice. Gibb sometimes draws on this democratic impulse found in E. D. Hirsch, the idea that 'for a diverse society to prosper, mutual understanding between different groups is vital' (Gibb, 2016d). However, Hirsch has been readily 'anglicised' within the class system by those who are less interested in promoting a wider connection between knowledge and class consciousness, but more for getting *their* pupils into the higher echelons of

society. This is also a consequence of marrying notions of equality with a school system built around outcomes, league tables and competition. Vocal supporters (usually prominent headteachers or MAT leaders) of the Gibb and Gove programme talk about providing 'education as good as the education kids get at Eton and Harrow', so they 'know what people in the club know' (de Souza, quoted in Griffiths, 2017). The implication of such statements rests on the idea that without the right cultural capital, one 'can't be flexible in [their] thinking or hold the conversations with the kind of people who hold top jobs or go to top universities' (Birbalsingh, quoted in Griffiths, 2017). This mode of thinking frames educational attainment and social mobility as procedural fairness and negates other ways of articulating questions of social justice and inequality.

Within debates and speeches outlining the Conservative programme, the concept of 'knowledge' is privileged and framed within various traditional rhetorical appeals. Firstly, the concept is mobilised to shape the government's credentials as driven by evidence and 'what works'. It helps to situate those in favour of the reforms as being on the side of evidence (logos, or the appeal to logic), notably framed within the lessons drawn from cognitive science. According to Gibb, knowledge of cognitive science has brought research into memory to the forefront, as well as providing teaching with 'myth-busting research' that 'improves their knowledge and empowers them to deliver high-quality lessons' (Gibb, 2017). Moreover, Gibb goes as far as to say that when he first started his role in the DfE, he provided all civil servants with a hardbound copy of E. D. Hirsch's book *Cultural literacy* to prove 'we were not entirely alone in our ideas' (Gibb, 2015a). Secondly, there is also a strong appeal to pathos when many arguments tie the concept of traditional knowledge with class fairness and social justice. According to Gibb, the first step for any pupil is to learn a coherent body of knowledge; for a 'socially just and socially mobile society, pupils must have access to this knowledge' (Gibb, 2016e).

A core argument from Conservative reforms has been that 'progressivism' in teaching has worsened the educational chances of disadvantaged pupils. In his speeches, Gove reinforced this message by referring to the 'soft bigotry of low expectations' to characterise research that makes the point that poorer pupils struggle at school because of socio-economic factors (Gove, 2012d, 2013f)Instead, it is an educational conservatism that leads to newly empowered children and progressive ends (Gove, 2013a). He has drawn an equivalence with the 'bell-curve right' as well as the 'class-struggle left', who have more in common than they realise when it comes to expectations about disadvantaged children (Gove, 2012a). As Nick Turnbull notes: 'rhetoric becomes political when it explicates questions of social distance in such a way that they may be moved' (Turnbull, 2017, p. 124). In a speech (Gove, 2012a) to school leaders, the aim is to transcend the right and the left and instead situate his viewpoint within the moral concerns of pupil disadvantage.

During debates in Parliament, however, Gove has resisted the supposedly regressive elements of teacher education and institutions such as LEAs, unions and established groups such as the National Association for the Teaching of English (Gove, 2012e), who are dismissed as 'yet another pressure group' consisting of people 'whose moral relativism' has 'led to dumbing down' (Gove, 2012e). As a form, political debates draw on a different mode of persuasion and often concern the direction of

politics, as well as 'the policies advanced, supported, criticised or rejected by a government, a party or an individual politician' (Weisner *et al.*, 2017, p. 145). Gove does this forcefully, by delegitimising the views of a well-established organisation.

In many ways, Gove's remarks on curriculum signalled both a desire for and an aversion towards the very object he now feels belongs to the enemy. He has regularly stolen and reframed things that belong to his opposition, such as Gramsci and (lesbian) poetry. One may consider how far one can 'come out' in support of *French lesbian* poetry when poetry should have nothing to do with gender politics altogether (Gove, 2012d). This purity certainly chimes to the extent that both Gibb and Gove prescribe to the view that progressive institutions have taken over the entire education agenda. This includes Gove's past lamentation about the relativism and postmodernism entering the Cabinet Office and Gibb's comments that one must think about how to crack open the 'secret garden' and 'break up the cement of the ways things had been done since the 1960s' (Gibb, 2018). 'Cracking open' the secret garden has required stronger rhetorical attacks. Gove has drawn on political logics to construct a sharp frontier between *mos*t teachers and the bankrupted institutions that have held them back or confused them with pseudo theories. Rather, 'knowledge transfer' leading to 'social justice' is delivered by reasonable, common-sense and hard-working teachers to the underprivileged and not by the educational establishment, captured by a 'backward bankrupt ideology of left-wing establishment that perpetuates division and denies opportunity' (Gove, 2012b, 2013f).

For the rhetorician, Gove has framed social justice within conservative means. This tactic re-appropriates the language of the left on equality and removes it from its other progressive contexts (achieved through post-war legislation), situating it within a Conservative frame: 'co-opting the language of their opponents', as Yandell puts it (Yandell, 2017, p. 287). In the example about poetry, he posits subjects such as English devoid of clutter, confusion and 'progressive ideologies'. Knowledge is understood to fill the gaps of ignorance, whilst also smoothing over any potential contestation or ambiguity that has always been a central part of English's subject history (Belas & Hopkins, 2019). Knowledge in the 'Gove reforms' is articulated as 'inert, fixed, stable – ready to be delivered, more like a sack of potatoes than a box of delights, to the next generation' (Yandell, 2017, p. 250). This makes sense in Gove's world, where specific subjects with their 'liberal curriculum' are best organised by linear examinations that prioritise knowledge over skills: 'subjects are nothing if they are not coherent traditional bodies of knowledge' (Gove, 2012d).

The reforms have been highly effective in shifting the education 'Overton window' around how we define progressive education. When Gove and Gibb look around, all they see is the 'progressivism' perpetuated by New Labour. But as Ken Jones has incisively pointed out, this is only a strand of 'progressivism'. The current debate in English schooling policy is between (OECD) 'progressive' skills-based curricula that train young people for human labour on the one hand, and a cultural conservativism enthralled to the notion of a mono-state on the other (Jones, 2019). The latter currently grips the Conservative party more firmly under Boris Johnson, conspicuously visible through his rebuke of business regarding Brexit. Specifically, ideas about the subject of English have been narrowed in the process of the Conservatives taking control of the agenda. Always evoking the trope of 'progressivism' and limiting the term

to its neoliberal roots has the effect of rewriting (and writing out) the full history of the concept (yet another counter-revolutionary tactic). The strategy has effectively 'marginalised into non-existence' the traditions pursued by educators of the subject of English, such as John Dixon and Harold Rosen, who saw the role of the teacher as understanding and mediating through curriculum 'innovating the social and cultural changes that students were living through' (Jones, 2019, p. 329).

In many ways, this strategy embodies continuation of the neoliberal education system (spanning multiple UK governments) that has helped neutralise anything that might cater to political contest and debate, much like the appeals of economic necessity have given rise to an 'apparently neutral logic of decision-making (market like in its calculations)' (Newman & Clarke, 2018, p. 42). Though New Labour had been more open with their National Curriculum, the pursuit of managerialism in schools and their own 'what works' agenda had also squeezed out broader conversations about the purpose of schooling. Following the impulse of neoliberalism, teachers have been trained to develop pupils' job skills, which had itself filtered out broader moral and ethical discussions in teacher training, leading to 'consequences for teachers and teacher education in terms of alienation and loss of voice' (Clarke & Phelan, 2017, p. 5). Across successive UK governments, reforming the plane of teacher professionalism has been about managing and extending its connection to the discourse of standards, thereby negating a 'properly political view of education based on genuine alternatives' (Clarke & Phelan, 2017, p. 6).

Conclusion

This article has drawn on some tools and concepts from British interpretive political studies and used them to study the rhetorical and organisational strategies of the Conservative education reforms. Such an exercise relies on the 'interpretation of texts' to understand 'political moves, intentions and strategies that are linked to it' (Weisner *et al.*, 2017, p. 82). In part, the article has aimed to introduce the BERJ readership to the tools of rhetoric and logics, and to show how it might enhance our understanding of the connections between education, political language and strategy. The purpose of reading education policy through this politico-theoretical lens is to make the case that political argumentation matters as part of the analyst's repertoire for studying schooling reform. It offers an insight into the worldview of politicians and provides us with a better understanding of how educational programmes are instituted at the discursive and symbolic level. Though this article reads populism as primarily a strategy to achieve specific reforms that come from multiple political traditions, its logic has fed (and spilt) into broader discourses around questions of teacher expertise, institutions and state bureaucracy that have been long-lasting, with Brexit and the reforms currently being instituted in Whitehall (Gove, 2020). However, evoking populist reasoning does not automatically lead to political outcomes: 'the people' they claim to represent, the criticism of 'the elite' they oppose as illegitimate and the crises to which they respond is an active interpretation, 'both separately and together, are contestable' (De Cleen *et al.*, 2018, p. 651).

I have interpreted the Conservative education reform through a definition of populism inspired by the discourse-theoretical tradition because it foregrounds the construction of the people–elite antagonism and focuses squarely on its use as a political strategy for achieving specific policy goals. Conservative politicians have drawn on several political traditions and resources to articulate their reasoning. Policy, however, has been instituted by taking on an 'enemy' supposedly stuck in its ways. On the surface, Gibb and Gove argue that the reforms open up 'autonomy' compatible with pluralism in the schooling system and debate, 'allowing a thousand flowers to bloom'[1] (Gibb, 2014). Across my case analysis of two policy areas, I have conceptualised how rhetorical strategies have been utilised to simplify the social space into competing groups when it comes to arguments about legitimacy and where teacher training should be controlled. Moreover, with curriculum, there has been a concerted effort to take control over what is taught in schools, which has been mobilised within a rhetorical strategy that simultaneously 'employ[s] the language of liberal possibility while ultimately espousing an invidious exclusionary and assimilationist politics' (Belas & Hopkins, 2019, p. 320).

With specific policies such as curriculum and pedagogy, politicians constructed a common enemy by situating themselves against 'those of a sociological bent' (Gibb, 2016b) or 'anti-knowledge' (Gibb, 2016c). The specific articulation of concepts such as 'knowledge' draws frontiers between those supposedly on the correct side of the debate and those not. In naming such a programme of logics, however, we can point to their contingency and the proposition that we are dealing with unsettled questions. Despite the Conservative reforms being controversial amongst the teaching profession, the Conservatives have managed to constitute major changes in the structural delivery of teacher training. Politicians have adapted their arguments to maintain the sense of insurgency even a decade on (though the programme has been less focused, in part, because of Brexit and no stable leadership in the DfE because of multiple Cabinet reshuffles).

The article has shown how politicians such as Gove have seized opportunities to simplify the political space to achieve political goals: an essential component of the populist tactic. For instance, in 2011, Gove praised the Director of Education and Skills at the OECD and collator of the PISA test data Andreas Schleicher as the 'man who knows more about education than anyone on the globe: not a "bureaucrat" but the "father of more revolutions than any German since Karl Marx"' (Gove, 2012c). The Tories had used the PISA rankings to attack Labour when they were in opposition because the UK had fallen lower in the tables. In 2018, after Schleicher made public comments about the UK's drift away from skills and competency-based curricula and towards knowledge and cultural capital, Gibb stated that the OECD had become too politicised in 'pushing a particular, progressive approach to education' in the twenty-first-century competency-based curriculum (Gibb, 2018). Populist reasoning does not worry too much about its past contradictions. The purpose of constructing an elite (and inventing new ones if need be) is to drive through a set of political goals and thwart challenges to the programme. Deploying the right tools of analysis can help us better understand the connections between argumentation, strategy and reform.

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Ethical guidelines

Ethics approval was not required as no data was not collected from participants. Speeches and documents concern public figures and are widely available.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest is declared by the author.

Data availability statement

All documents and speeches analysed in this article are publicly available via gov.uk.

NOTE

[1] Unironically outdoing Chairman Mao's: 'letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend is the policy of promoting the progress of the arts and sciences'.

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