

‘Benedict XVI is a wholly authentic figure’



The Education Secretary talks about the bishops, free schools and his admiration for the Pope

The Education Secretary is putting on weight, but it suits him. Previously, Michael Gove was considered too much of a whippet to be statesmanlike – it stood between him and party leadership rumours – but his fresh girth gives him gravitas, as do his words.

“Earned success is the route to happiness,” he tells me, wolfing down a pork chop. He’s quoting the American social scientist Arthur Brooks, whose book *The Battle* has been an influence on Gove’s educational thinking.

It’s no coincidence that Brooks is a musician as well as an academician: Mr Gove frequently uses musical metaphors to explain the thinking behind his educational reforms. “People say I want children to learn by rote,” he says. “I don’t. I want them to learn by heart.

“Think of musical scales. It’s only when you really know your scales backwards, when they are ingrained, that you are able to be creative, to play and to understand music.”

Gove points out that the skills children learn when, for example, studying Latin help them to develop the mental dexterity to tackle complex equations in mathematics – and even to juggle logic sequences in computer languages.

“For Mark Zuckerberg, it was an automatic leap for him – and for Harvard – from three dead languages to becoming a programmer.”

Often disingenuously criticised for being “backward-looking” and “elitist”, the Education Secretary himself is not a product of the public school system. He was adopted at the age of four into a Labour-voting family in Aberdeen. Later, he won a scholarship to a fee-paying school, before being accepted at Oxford.

Prior to entering politics Gove was a journalist for the Times, a newspaper for which his wife, Sarah Vine, still works. The couple regularly attend St Mary Abbots, an Anglican church in Kensington, west London. He is in many ways the odd one out in a Cabinet of privilege.

It appears to have given him some insight. Entrepreneurs in east London tell me that Gove's reforms are the best chance Britain has of equipping its young people with the skills they need to operate in a globalised digital information economy.

Employers consistently moan about British graduates with degrees from respected universities who nonetheless struggle with simple arithmetic – and with timekeeping – so lax are the standards in our public institutions. Is it any wonder that public life is dominated by the products of Eton and Westminster?

Mr Gove is too diplomatic to repeat the wording of my question, but when I ask him what he plans to do to reverse 13 years of neglect of the education system under Labour he is unapologetic about the importance of discipline, rigour, standards and foreign languages. It's inspiring stuff.

"There are people out there," he says, "who are victims of an invincible prejudice, who believe that teaching, for example, classical languages is ipso facto for the elite.

"But the synapses connect in a different way when you learn a foreign language. The mind is framed to assess knowledge. I want to strengthen and inculcate what Oliver Letwin's mother has called the 'vigorous virtues'."

That impression of elitism, unfairly leveraged in the press every time Mr Gove suggests a new reform or delivers a speech, is a product of unions terrified by the prospect of teaching at a high intellectual level, I suggest.

"I simply want young people to be exposed to the very best that has been thought and written," says Gove, repeating a mantra from Matthew Arnold he has quoted before. "There's no reason why children should be denied the opportunity to understand history, to discover the story of those who made them, on the basis that it is assumed they are 'incapable' of appreciating it.

"There has been an assumption that only a small number of children are capable of benefiting from that degree of rigour. This is not a prejudice that countries in East Asia, for example, are burdened with."

That, perhaps, is why Catholic schools are embracing the conversion to Gove's new Academy structure, I say. After all, the Church has a fine tradition of high art and serious scholarship throughout its history. "Absolutely," he agrees.

When I ask whether he would consider relaxing the 50 per cent maximum quota for Catholic students in new free schools, something many parents asked me to put to him, Gove appears untroubled by the cap, saying he has no plans to relax it, regardless of the demand from Catholic communities.

"Remember, there's no reason why a new school with only 50 per cent Catholic students shouldn't have a wholly Catholic ethos," he says. "Of course, by definition, free schools are free to choose their

own curriculum.

“Traditionally, Catholic schools have been concentrated in certain parts of the country. But Catholic parents who want a Catholic education for their children now have a way of providing it. Free schools are a way of increasing capacity, not limiting it.”

When I ask whether Mr Gove is making efforts to engage with a younger generation of bishops, such as those in Shrewsbury and Portsmouth, who some claim to be more enthusiastic about educational reform than their seniors, he is encouraging.

“The Catholic Education Service and the hierarchy have been becoming warmer to the sorts of policies that we have been advancing,” he says. “There is a greater openness now.”

Is there anything particular about this present Pope, I ask, that offers hope for the future? “It is striking that when I went to the events in Britain that the Pope presided over... I mean, the enthusiasm of the young people, and the fact that Benedict was so obviously enjoying it.

“Young people are very good at scenting authenticity and inauthenticity. And Benedict XVI is a wholly authentic figure.

“He has not compromised his style or beliefs in his role. As a result, I think, anyone who is from a Catholic background, you will think: wonderful! If you are a young person, and you have religious beliefs, you want that affirmed. You don’t want an authority figure questioning it for you.”

Much the same can be said of the teachers Gove himself now presides over, many of whom are fighting tooth and nail to resist the changes he wishes to make. Mr Gove must have faith of a different kind – in parents and in students themselves – that the need for his reforms, which is great, is recognised by the public.

Hearteningly, he compliments the timeless and consistent dedication to education that the Church has made, in a statement that should move each of us to support his marvellous innovations.

“Education Secretaries come and go,” he says, “but the Catholic Church’s role in education is global and enduring.”

Catholic Herald - Milo Yiannopoulos