

Revolving doors

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A review of 'If I were Education Secretary', edited by Geoff Barton

Sit in the waiting room of Sanctuary Buildings, the home of the DfE, and lift your gaze to the individual photographs of all 44 Secretaries of State for Education to have served in that office since 1944.

As Tim Coulson notes in his essay (featured as December's Guest Column), in the last 35 years only three education secretaries - Baker, Blunkett and Gove - have had longer than three years in the post.

This theme of revolving doors at the head of the country's education service runs through a significant number of the essays in this collection: how can we possibly sustain anything in our schools when short-termism is the golden thread?

Editor Geoff Barton writes that in mid-2021, emerging from the pandemic, he asked school and college leaders across the UK to send him their thoughts on what they would do if they held the highest office in education. He asked for contributors to write from the heart, to speak their minds without obsessing about style or learned references.

What we have here then, in Barton's words are 45 (he should have nicely cut one to achieve the symbolic symmetry of 44) contributions from the frontline 'each writing in a personal capacity, sometimes in fury, sometimes with eye-rolling wistfulness, sometimes through anecdotes, occasionally in poetry':

*I could sit very still
And just listen,
To the experts and all
That they say*

*I'd write copious notes
Of the changes
They want,
Then engineer
Them to truth in one day*

Or

*I could talk to the teachers,
The children in schools
And listen to those
In the know.....*

Jennifer Hanson

Aside from revolving doors, the themes and subjects range predictably very widely: placing schools at the heart of their communities, getting inclusion right, reforming the examination system, bringing equity to admissions, abolishing league tables, refocusing Ofsted, reforming term lengths, introducing the IB curriculum, ending the long tail of under-achievement once and for all.

While the content will be familiar to most of us who work in schools and colleges, the distinctive feature of this collection is giving the opportunity to fresh voices - immersed in classrooms - to pose and answer the question: Do you see what I see?

Readers will enjoy dipping into every piece and perhaps dwell on those pages which either challenge their own assumptions or capture memorably what they are already thinking.

My attention was caught in particular by Pepe Di'lasio's impassioned plea for 'an end to partnerships working in silos'; by Michael Kidd's clarity of view that every child should be entitled to a rich musical curriculum; and by Cath Kitchen's rejection of defining children by their academic attainment.

To return to revolving doors: Nick Chafer would remove the SoS post altogether and, in parallel to the Bank of England, establish an independent public organisation to lead education over the coming decades.

Approaching the season of giving, most teachers I know would enjoy dipping into this collection over the festive period. The contributors' energies, insights and fundamental optimism will serve to recharge the batteries for 2023.

And, note, all royalties go to the ASCL Benevolent Fund. Buy a few copies as prizes for the end-of-term quiz!

['If I Were Education Secretary...': Views from the frontline](#)