

Let the schools in England breathe awhile

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July 2025

The independence of His Majesty's Chief Inspector is fundamental to the office's authority: [The government's inspector](#).

In common with all HMI, the chief inspector signs the Official Secrets Act and pledges to serve without fear or favour. Therein lies the national inspectorate's reputation and credibility.

We have now entered a period where that independence is at risk of being compromised.

Sir Martyn Oliver was by many accounts a successful leader of schools. Those leadership attributes led the Conservative government - in the shape of Secretary of State Gillian Keegan - to appoint him in October 2023. Bridget Phillipson is of a different persuasion. Her exchange of letters with Oliver in June on the subject of the proposed new inspection framework is nothing less than fraught.

Re-enter this messy fray Dame Christine Gilbert, a former HMCI. In previously investigating Ruth Perry's death she must have encountered if not conflicts of interest, at least professional disquiet in returning to her former stamping ground and interviewing employees she employed.

Now we have the unwholesome situation of a former chief inspector chairing Ofsted.

What is Oliver to do? Which way is he meant to jump? In exercising, as he should, independence of thought and action, he is likely to be constrained by his chair. Perhaps Oliver will leave quietly and Gilbert will reprise her HMCI role.

Meantime, school leaders and their staff are left in limbo. The Ofsted framework is the playscript for the profession. Whether we like it or not, school improvement and development planning for the year ahead are rooted in 'what will Ofsted say?'

I have long argued that 'if it ain't broke then don't fix it'. Belatedly, the unions and professional associations have arrived at the same conclusion: let the current framework continue for another academic year, or else

At the same time, the old certainties of 'improvement through inspection' are being questioned. For example, in Dubai, after 17 years of inspecting every international school annually, this and next year most inspection work has been paused - to allow a deep breath and refresh. And there are no signs there of leaders taking their foot off the rigorous self-evaluation pedal.

Perhaps the silver lining of the current impasse in England should be a similar pause in routine school inspections for the 2025-2026 academic year. This might lead to a considered taking stock of proportionate inspection for the long term. In our restless world political leaders are currently urging one another to exercise restraint and buy time: 'jaw jaw not war war'.

Let the schools in the nation breathe a while. Nothing would be lost; so much would be gained.

Happy Holidays when they arrive!

Roy Blatchford's latest book is to be published in August: [*The A -Z of Good Governance*](#)