

EDUCATION,
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The ‘war on woke’ currently being waged by Conservative politicians and sections of the media has a long history. It has appeared under different banners and in varied forms over the past 200 years, all rooted in an Anglo-Saxon culture deeply suspicious of ideas and the intellectual. ‘Too clever by half’ is an expression unknown in other cultures, and the glorification of ‘common sense’ and the ‘down to earth’ is a peculiarly English trait. Many posters on social media boast that they have been ‘educated in the school of life’ as if that were a badge of honour.

Valuing and devaluing learning and intellect

It wasn’t always so. Learning, wit and intellect were highly valued in the England of William Shakespeare, of John Milton, of the [Putney debates](#). Even in the mid-18th century, the French satirist and writer [Voltaire](#) wrote of England as a place where “learning is held in greater honour ... than in our country – the English generally *think*”.

But the industrial revolution saw the growth of a brutalised and poorly educated underclass, while at the other end of the social scale public school culture increasingly glorified sport and physical prowess over intellectual achievement. Result? The average red-blooded English person’s despising of learning and of intellectuals as somehow ‘effete’ and a danger to the state, and a deeply ambiguous attitude to education on the part of the ruling class.

In England in particular, we are not a nation of intellectuals, and we are not interested in politics. “*Question Time* shows Britain at its most unattractive for the simple reason that the English don’t really want to discuss politics. We will vote when elections come round but that is about it. Force an Englishman to express a political opinion, and he will make a fool of himself”, said [Auberon Waugh in 2019](#).

Education as a political football

The ambiguity towards education on the part of the ruling classes has allowed it to become a political football in recent years, subject to constantly changing fashions and ideologies. While in reality, schools reflect the ills of society – growing inequality, crumbling infrastructure, a fragmented and part-privatised system – they are often expected by public and politicians alike to be the agents of positive change.

Panic storms about falling standards and accusations of ‘liberal-lefty teachers’ corrupting young minds, often whipped up by the right-wing media, are used to justify sweeping changes to the curriculum. The most recent and drastic example being the reforms introduced by [Michael Gove](#), secretary of state for education from 2010 to 2014.



Undoing much of the previous Labour government's investment in early years education and school infrastructure, he concentrated on bringing in a much more traditional curriculum, with its focus on teaching grammatical structures to six and seven-year-olds, and introducing a rigorous testing system. [A hundred education academics](#) wrote at the time:

"The new curriculum promotes rote learning without understanding and demands too much too young."

Education, education education?

The pressure on schools to achieve good [SATs](#) results and on teachers to 'teach to exams', has created a system focused on output rather than on the development of the individual child. Budget cuts over 12 years of Conservative rule have resulted in increased class sizes and

a narrowing range of subjects taught at both primary and secondary level. It's a far cry from [Tony Blair's vision of 2001](#):

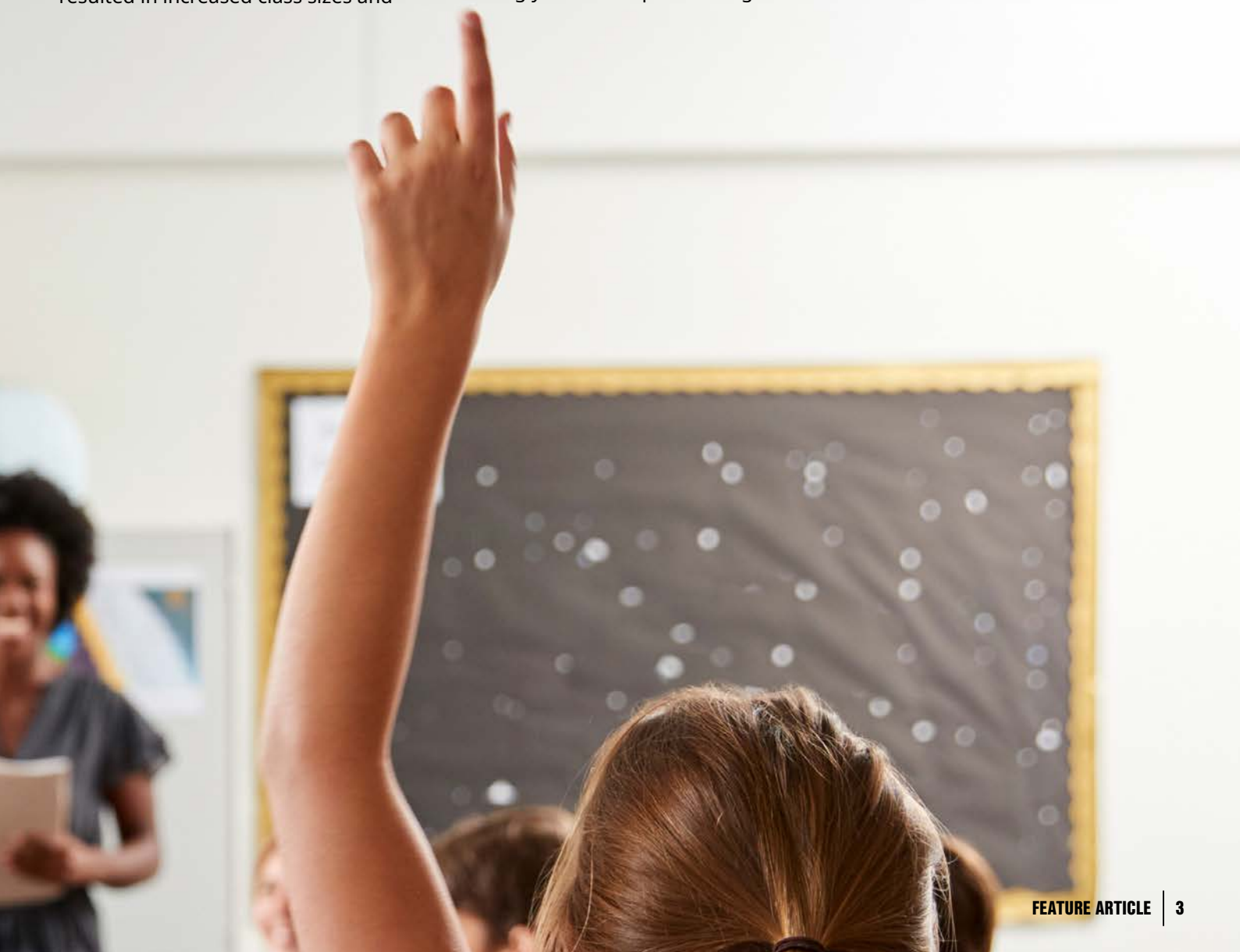
"Our top priority was, is and always will be education, education, education. To overcome decades of neglect and make Britain a learning society, developing the talents and raising the ambitions of all our young people. At a good school children gain the basic tools for life and work. But they ought also to learn the joy of life: the exhilaration of music, the excitement of sport, the beauty of art, the magic of science."

A new vision for education

There is the scent of change in the air. The disruption to children's schooling from lockdown and Covid was not altogether negative. For some, it created a 'firebreak' from the seemingly inevitable path through

primary and secondary education. Many children enjoyed spending more time with parents, being away from a pressurised school environment, having space to follow interests and learn at their own pace. It's not a coincidence that the number of children on the elective home education register [grew by 34% between 2019 and 2021](#).

In 2022, education is in desperate need of a new vision. Politicians should stop pretending that schools can redress the ills caused by rapidly growing inequality and social division. They should stop peddling the idea that education can be done on the cheap. Changing a 'one size fits all' approach to one that focuses on the individual child, their particular level of development and learning preferences, would transform our education system. And above all, let's banish that mindless slogan 'War on Woke'.



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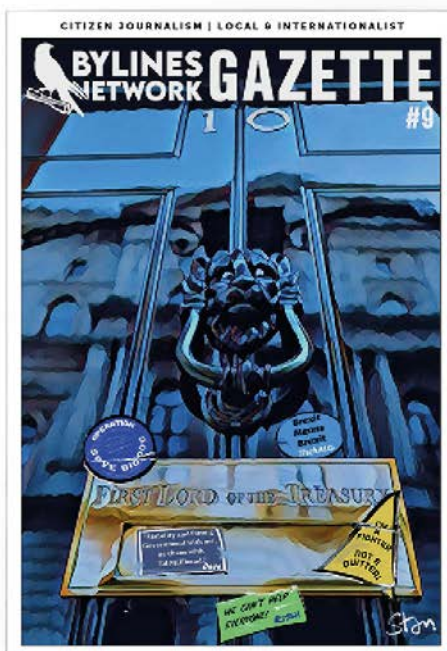
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