Gove abandons plan to scrap GCSEs after coalition pressure

Liberal Democrats and exam groups force out English Baccalaureate certificate

Peter Walker

Michael Gove will announce today that he has abandoned his plans to replace GCSEs with a new English Baccalaureate certific­ate (EBC) after mounting concern within the coalition and from education groups.

In what will be seen as a humiliating reverse for the education secretary, for the second time they have helped thwart Gove’s agenda, it will be announced that the regulator viewed the change as unworkable as planned.

The U-turn was seized on by Labour, who branded it a “humiliating climbdown” for Gove. Stephen Twigg, the shadow education secretary, said: “It shows why he is a bad politician.”

Gove’s offer last month to bring in the new qualification in September meant that the change would have come in at the same time as the next big GCSE resit for pupils who did not complete their exams first time.

Opposition to the plan was primarily forced by a combination of opposition from Liberal Democrats and reservations from Ofqual.

A standfirst is used to add detail that was not included in the headline.

In November, Ofqual’s chief regulator, Glenys Stacey, wrote to Gove to warn him that his ambitions for the English Baccala­urate certificate “may exceed what is realistically achievable through a single assessment”. Though politely worded, the meaning was clear: the regulator viewed the change as unworkable as planned.

The Liberal Democrat input is the sec­ond time they have helped thwart Gove’s policies. Last year, Nick Clegg lobbed a bomb for the Department for Education to drop plans to lead a newspaper to a twin­replacement for the GCSE, billed by some as a return to O-levels and CSEs.

Another motivation appears to be civil service warnings that the decision to give single exam boards responsibility for setting exams in a particular core subject could counter EU rules on public service contracts.

The report from the education select committee was more damning still, with MPs the­n contracts.

Critics, however, as well as condemn­ing the rush, said the change would make pupils “focus too restricted”. Tests com­panies lobbied for computer science to be added to the set of core subjects and many of the arts would complain the new qualification would squeeze out creative subjects, with interjections from sources as varied as Jude Law and Tracy Emin.

However, the most significant political blows came first with Stacey’s letter to Gove, copied to Sir Michael Wilshaw, the chief inspector of schools, and then with the announcement of the Ofqual U-turn.

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