JAMES LANDALE:
Now the Education Secretary, Michael Gove, is learning to play the ukelele, but in his free time, when he’s not torturing his family’s eardrums, he’s bent on driving through what he calls “a cultural revolution in education.” He’s introduced new free schools and hundreds of academies; modular exams are out; the three Rs are in; and, yes, there’s another attempt at rewriting the National Curriculum. But the teaching unions and some leading academics are very unhappy. Well Michael Gove is with me now. Good morning.

MICHAEL GOVE:
Good morning, James.

JAMES LANDALE:
You have made progress in reforming schools, giving the more autonomy as academies, but you have made much less progress reforming exams and the National Curriculum. What’s the problem? Why is it taking so long?
MICHAEL GOVE:
Well we wanted to make sure that the first thing that we did as soon as we came into power was to give teachers more power, control and influence over what happens in their classrooms over the length of the school day, over the discipline methods that they could use in order to keep order. And then we moved onto the whole question of how those extra freedoms would be seen in a context of accountability, and that’s why we then had to change the curriculum and we then had to change exams. But one of the things that struck me is that in the same way as there’s been popularity for some of the structural changes we’ve made - academies and free schools - with teachers in the lead, so some of the people who’ve been most enthusiastic about the changes that we’re making to the curriculum and to exams have been teachers and academics themselves.

JAMES LANDALE:
You’ve got quite unstuck in some of these areas. On exams, you wanted to bring back O levels and CSEs. That didn’t happen. You wanted to bring in new English Baccalaureat certificates to replace GCSEs. That’s now not happening. And you’re back to your third best option of reforming GCSEs - making them a little less modular, more exam focused. You know is this really going to be enough to create the world class exam system that you promised in this week’s Queen’s Speech?

MICHAEL GOVE:
I think it will be a significant step forward towards a world class exam system. You’re absolutely right, I haven’t got everything that I wanted. You know that’s one of the things that you have to live with in politics sometimes. You know I bit off more than I could chew. I wanted to move to just one exam board because I thought that would be a way of preventing the race to the bottom. In the end I had to accept that that wasn’t the right thing to do. But we are making some big changes elsewhere, you’re absolutely right - we’re getting rid of modules and re-sits, we’re having more time for teaching and learning, less time on assessment and driving people through the sheep pen of all these tests. And actually what’s been interesting is that while you might say that these changes are modest - and I certainly think they’re very reasonable - there are still lots of people you know on the hard left and in the trade unions who are making a hell of a noise about it, so it’s not without controversy. And it’s also the
case - and this is the most cheering thing for me - that you’ve got people like Mark Warner, the Cambridge Physics Professor, one of the most distinguished scientists in Britain today, writing in The Sunday Times today saying three cheers for what the Government are doing. At last they’re restoring rigor to our exams.

JAMES LANDALE:
Well let’s look at your other changes to the National Curriculum. Upset many people, particularly the historians. “A pub quiz list of facts”, they say - too introspective, too chronological, too un-analytical. Are you going to take account of all of these criticisms when you publish your final proposals?

MICHAEL GOVE:
I couldn’t take account of all of the criticisms because some of them are self-contradictory, but I will take account of some from people whom I genuinely respect. And it’s really been striking actually that while there have been one or two academics - Richard Evans at Cambridge, for example - who’ve been quite critical, there’s been overwhelming …

JAMES LANDALE:
(over) One or two?

MICHAEL GOVE:
Yeah one or two.

JAMES LANDALE:
Many letters to The Observer …

MICHAEL GOVE:
Yeah, but …

JAMES LANDALE:
You know even those people who advise you, people like Simon Schama, have been critical.
MICHAEL GOVE:
Well what’s been striking is that Simon Schama says that the central change that we’re making, which is putting British history back at the heart of the curriculum, giving people an understanding of the chronology of these islands, is the right thing to do, and there were letters to The Times and there’s been a chorus of support from some of the most distinguished historians saying that we’re actually doing the right thing. And also teachers whom I’ve talked to are enthusiastic about these changes and it is striking that some of the people who were most in despair about the old history curriculum are those who want me to change. Now just this week, for example James, I was drawing attention to the fact that 15 and 16 year olds are being taught about the rise of Hitler, which is the area that Richard Evans has made his own, by using Mr Men as a way of illustrating it.

JAMES LANDALE:
But that’s one website somewhere. I mean what …

MICHAEL GOVE:
*(over)* It’s a very popular … Well the critical thing is the reason I raise that is because a teacher brought it to my attention because this is a popular resource being used in classrooms. And the striking thing is it’s often the case that people portray this argument as the minister versus teachers. In fact what we have are teachers who are passionate about raising standards at last feeling there’s a government on our side, and I want to back those people in our schools …

JAMES LANDALE:
*(over)* But there …

MICHAEL GOVE:
*(over)* … a growing number of young teachers who want to raise standards.

JAMES LANDALE:
… there is a balance here between knowledge and analysis …
MICHAEL GOVE:
Yeah.

JAMES LANDALE:
… and children need to be taught both. And what the critics are saying is that you’ve gone too much down the learning by rote facts, but yes you need to have the facts but you’re not giving kids enough research skills, analytical skills in this curriculum; that you know it’s too much about, in your words, about “British heroes and heroines”, and not … You know, for example, I mean the thing that shocked me most, your curriculum talks about The Enlightenment and has lots about you know Adam Smith. Nothing about Voltaire. I mean do you see what I mean? You know is too parochial, too British?

MICHAEL GOVE:
Well I was going to say that the current history curriculum doesn’t have anything about Voltaire or Diderot or any of these French philosophers. What the current history curriculum does, I’m afraid, is reduce things to a lowest common denominator level which provides people with a level of historical knowledge that is just not adequate to then go on to be able to use the analytical skills that both of us want to see. You can’t use analytical skills, you can’t write a proper history essay unless you understand the chronology, the facts, the personalities. It’s the same in science. You can’t understand a causation in science unless you have an understanding of the basic laws and the basic principles that underpin it.

JAMES LANDALE:
It’s very prescriptive. I mean this week you gave a speech suggesting that 17 year old girls should read Middlemarch and not Twilight.

MICHAEL GOVE:
Yes.

JAMES LANDALE:
I mean what right do you as Secretary of State have to tell people what to read?
I have every right, I think, to argue that we should higher standards. And I know that when I make that argument that I’m responding to what parents tell me. I personally believe that if children are reading anything, that’s a good thing, but we shouldn’t settle for children reading merely fiction that assumes to be relevant to them today or easy to access. We should demand higher standards of every child. And one of the problems that we’ve had in the past is there’s been an assumption that books like Middlemarch or plays by Shakespeare or poems by Keats or Wordsworth are only ever accessible to a minority, to a gilded elite. I think that’s wrong. I know from my own background that children from humble homes, when they’re given the chance to understand you know the power of great literature or the emotional sort of wrenching power of great music …

JAMES LANDALE:
Yeah.

MICHAEL GOVE:
… respond to that. And one of the problems that we’ve had in the past is a dumbed down curriculum has assumed that children can only ever be treated as though they’re infants, even to the age of 15 or 16, when what I want to do is prepare them for the adult world by introducing them to greatness.

JAMES LANDALE:
Okay, let’s talk about childcare.

MICHAEL GOVE:
Yes.

JAMES LANDALE:
Are you going to increase the number of children that nursery staff and childminders can look after or not?

MICHAEL GOVE:
Yes, I believe that Liz Truss’s proposals are absolutely right; we should implement them. It will mean, I believe, that the costs of childcare go down. It will also mean
that the quality of the experience that children receive will improve because we will have more highly qualified people. At the moment we have a problem with childcare. Not just cost. It’s the case that there are many children who are in you know sort of pre-school situations who arrive at primary school without the necessary skills required to hit the ground running and to start learning.

JAMES LANDALE:
But the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg has made it very clear he is deeply concerned about this, not least because the consultation that happened raised an awful lot of concerns.

MICHAEL GOVE:
Yes the consultation did raise a number of issues. There are some people who were concerned. There are other people like Sir Martin Nary, the Head of Barnardo’s - who I don’t think anyone can accuse of being indifferent to child welfare - who are passionately in favour of these changes. But I don’t think that we can understand Nick Clegg’s position without also appreciating the position that he’s in because of internal Lib-Dem politics.

JAMES LANDALE:
So he’s not going to get his way?

MICHAEL GOVE:
Well I think one of the things that he has to do is that he’s got to show - because you know there’s a campaign at the moment being led by Matthew Oakeshott, this Liberal Democrat in the Lords, to try to destabilise Nick Clegg because Matthew Oakeshott wants Vince Cable to succeed and there are various stories in the newspapers today - and Nick, understandably, needs to show Lib-Dems that he’s fighting hard. I understand, that’s one of the things that happen in coalition. We’ve had discussions with Nick in the past where we haven’t always had the same starting position, but in the end, because he’s a reasonable guy, we’ve managed to find an appropriate synthesis. And I think he’ll appreciate that the logic of what Liz wants to achieve is formidable, and of course if there needs to be an adjustment here or there in order to make sure that it works for everyone, we’ll consider that.
JAMES LANDALE:
So let’s be clear. You are suggesting that internal Lib-Dem politics and an attempt to destabilise Nick Clegg is determining policy about how children are cared for in this country?

MICHAEL GOVE:
Well I think we have to acknowledge that, you only need to look at the newspapers today to see that Lord Oakeshott is on manoeuvres, he’s trying to promote Vince. You know it’s understandable that within the Lib-Dems that these things go on. Nick has to show a bit of leg as it were on these issues. But we’ve seen these situations arise in the past and we’ve managed to resolve them in the national interest, and I think it’s only appropriate that we have an opportunity over the next week or two to ensure that the logic behind Liz’s position and any concerns that have been raised can be reconciled, so that we can have a situation where children get the care and attention they need in order to arrive at school ready to learn.

JAMES LANDALE:
I can’t wait to find out what happens in the next cabinet meeting with you sitting opposite Mr Clegg.

MICHAEL GOVE:
Well I was going to say, the cabinet remains, as you know, a confidential space where we can argue out our positions …

JAMES LANDALE:
(over) Sort them, okay.

MICHAEL GOVE:
… and then resolve our ideas.

JAMES LANDALE:
Okay, let’s talk about something else that remains confidential but not always. The Spending Review negotiations are underway. Many of your colleagues have said they
want a little piece of your budget.

MICHAEL GOVE:
Yes.

JAMES LANDALE:
Do you accept that education will have to share a bit more of the pain?

MICHAEL GOVE:
Well I think it’s absolutely right that all government departments should look at the bottom line and try to find savings and efficiencies, and we have, but I think it’s also important that we make sure that the money that goes direct to schools - and in particular the pupil premium that helps the most disadvantaged children - is protected.

JAMES LANDALE:
But you might accept a little bit of flexibility?

MICHAEL GOVE:
Well there are some areas outside the core schools budget where I think that we can accept that there may need to be some reductions. But we’re in negotiation with the Treasury, so I wouldn’t want to show my hand yet. I’m fighting hard to ensure that the budget priorities that we have, particularly making sure that we can protect spending for schools and spending for the most disadvantaged children, you know is insulated from the necessary economies that we need to make as a result of the economic situation we inherited.

JAMES LANDALE:
How has the Government got itself into such a muddle over Europe and how are you going to vote this week?

MICHAEL GOVE:
Well I saw some of the headlines today saying you know “civil war”, “turmoil” and all the rest of it. Well you can’t have a civil war when everyone’s on the same side. Fundamentally the majority, overwhelming majority of Conservative MPs, would like
to have a different relationship between Britain and Europe, and I emphatically want a
different relationship. You know, we used to work on The Times together. You were
a majestically objective reporter; I was a passionately committed leader writer. I’ve
you know fought for the last twenty years for a difference in the relationship between
Britain and Europe - a greater degree of independence and sovereignty. But I think the
most important thing to do is to support the Prime Minister in renegotiating our
position and then put it to a referendum. Some of my colleagues are you know very
exuberant and they want to let off steam. That’s fair enough. My own view is let the
Prime Minister lay out our negotiation platform, make sure that he has a majority -
which I’m convinced he’ll secure at the next election - and let’s have the referendum
then.

JAMES LANDALE:
Last October you were quoted by friends saying very explicitly that if there was a
referendum now, you would vote to leave the EU. Do you still believe that?

MICHAEL GOVE:
Yes, I’m not happy with our position in the European Union. But my preference is for
a change in Britain’s relationship with the European Union. My ideal is exactly what
the majority of the British public’s ideal is, which is to recognise the current situation
is no good, to say that life outside would be perfectly tolerable, we could contemplate
it, there would be certain advantages. But the best deal for Europe, and for Britain,
would be if Britain were to lead the change that Europe needs. We’ve got a situation
now in Spain where more than 50 per cent of young people are unemployed.

JAMES LANDALE:
Yeah.

MICHAEL GOVE:
If we’re going to transform Europe’s economy and Britain’s economy in all our
interests, then what we should do is follow the path laid out by the Prime Minister in
his speech.

JAMES LANDALE:
Come on, are you … how are you going to vote this week?

MICHAEL GOVE:
Oh I’m going to abstain because I believe that while we absolutely need to have a referendum at some point in the future, it’s not appropriate at this stage. And also in a way it’s an exercise, as I said earlier, in letting off steam because we can’t have a referendum bill because we’re in coalition. One of the things I think that is often under remarked is that coalition politics, as we’ve just been discussing, changes the way that things are seen. So you can have disagreements, but you mustn’t turn them into dramas because that misunderstands the way in which you know after next week’s vote, the coalition government will still be working together to reduce the deficit, improve schools, enhance the NHS.

JAMES LANDALE:
Michael Gove, the abstaining cabinet minister, thank you very much indeed.

MICHAEL GOVE:
Thank you.