ANDREW MARR SHOW, 30TH OCT 2016

SIR MICHAEL WILSHAW
CHIEF INSPECTOR, OFSTED

AM: Welcome Sir Michael. First of all, before we get onto that, just before we start, as you look back over your time, what is your conclusion now about the state of English school education?

MW: Well, we’ve got a better English education system now than we’ve ever had. Our system was in special measures, in intensive care, in the 70s, 80s and much of the 90s, but the reforms that have taken place to governance, restructure, academies, free schools, a better curriculum and assessment, certainly a tougher curriculum and assessment systems, have made a big difference and we’ve got a much better education system now, better literacy and numeracy levels in primary schools, six in ten youngsters get the top GCSEs. 20 years ago it was less than one in 5.

AM: That’s a solid achievement but I sense a ‘but’ coming.

MW: Well the big but is that we’re not there yet, we’re not with the best jurisdictions in the world. We’re not there with the South Koreas and the Shanghais and some of the really good European nations and we’ve got a lot to do to catch up and we’ve got to sort out the big regional differences in performance in our country, particularly at secondary level, particularly in the midlands and the north, and we’ve got to do something about skills.

AM: So how would you sum it up in a word?

MW: It’s six and a half out of ten.

AM: Mediocre?
MW: Mediocre but getting better.

AM: Mediocre but getting better. You’ve said about the poorest children and as you begin your last few months as Chief Inspector ‘it saddens me immeasurable to say frankly that we’re still letting down our poorest children and that if things do not change fundamentally we will continue to do so.’ What would fundamental change mean to help the poorest children?

MW: Well the long tail of underachievement which contains the poorest children in the main is one of the longest in the OECD, and if we’re going to become one of the top nations in the world we’ve got to do something about that. And there’s no magic bullet to this, but a lot of the poorest children are in those white working class communities and the rural areas and isolated communities, coastal resorts, we’ve got to crack that one. It’s not simple but we need to get the best teachers and we need to get the best leaders into those communities and show that they can make a difference. That is not happening at a rate that it should.

AM: Wouldn’t more grammar schools, choice by selection, rather than by house price as the Prime Minister’s put it, help some of those children?

MW: Well if I thought grammar schools were going to make a difference I’d be here saying so and I’d be waving the flag for grammar schools. I don’t think it would. We’ve moved on from... we mustn’t be misty eyed and nostalgic about the 50s when a small number of youngsters did every well and 80% of youngsters, more, did badly. Our economy now needs more highly skilled, better educated people than ever before.

AM: So for people watching who don’t quite get the argument what is the strongest case against grammar schools?
MW: Well, if you have grammar schools and you take away the most able children from the all ability comprehensive set up, and I speak as an ex Head of a successful inner city comprehensive school - an Academy in Hackney. I needed those top 20% to lift everyone up and it was my ambition to get 70, 80, 90% of youngsters through their GCSEs and I wouldn’t have been able to do it if those youngsters, those top, the most able youngsters went to the grammar school because it was their ambition, their excellence, that affected the rest of the school community.

AM: So there’s no way in which an expansion of grammar schools can’t help but damage schools around them?

MW: Absolutely and that’s the point that I’m making and we need now many more youngsters in the sort of economy, the service-led, knowledge economy, digital economy that we’ve now got to do well academically.

AM: So on grammar schools what’s your message to Theresa May and Justine Greening?

MW: I would not focus on grammar schools. I would focus on education and skills. It is the real Cinderella service of the education system and with Brexit we need many more skilled youngsters to go into the jobs in Sunderland and elsewhere.

AM: So we come to the heart of the argument really which is you say we need an education revolution to produce much more technical skills training in this country. We used to have Polytechnics all around the country, they’ve become universities, was that a mistake?

MW: I think it was a mistake. We need a skills revolution in this country. I’m a big supporter of what Lord Baker, Ken Baker’s trying to do with the University Technology Colleges, the 14 to 19
technology colleges. It’s got off to a shaky start but I think the principle is absolutely right. If you look at what’s happened in Germany and in Switzerland and in other European countries they’ve got it absolutely right and the reason they’ve got it absolutely right is that there’s a political focus on it in a way that there hasn’t been over the last half century here. And we’ve got to have that political focus and we’ve got to bang heads together. Employers, colleges and schools.

AM: And you have to persuade politicians as well, because there is no great drive for this at the moment. As you leave your current job are you going to commit – I’m sure you’ve got retirement plans and all sorts of things, but are you going to commit yourself to helping drive for a new generation of technical colleges and technical universities?

MW: Yes, I am and I’m going to join that movement because it’s the much needed reform that’s needed in our country. It’s the big gaping hole in our education system that needs to be filled, and Brexit won’t be a success unless we have more home grown talent coming through.

AM: And if we don’t do this, and we don’t have the migrants coming in from the rest of the EU, what happens to us?

MW: Well I’ll tell you what happens. We’ve just done a survey of 500 major employers in the country. Two thirds of them, two thirds of them said that the skill shortage is getting much, much worse, and that’s going to carry on unless we give it more time and attention and not focus on the top ten percent, focus on the great majority and those who need more skills.

AM: You have served under three different Secretaries of State for Education, you’ve been outspoken as I said at the beginning, Michael Gove has been the one who’s been in a sense the most
radical, determined to change things, charging in, a man of ideas, highly controversial. How do you rate him as an Education Secretary?

MW: Well he'll go down as one of the great Secretaries of State for Education. I had some rows with him which were well publicised, but I was broadly on the same page as he was. It needed radical reform; greater autonomy for people on the frontline; a reform of the curriculum which was wishy washy and not robust enough; reform the examination system: he was a good Secretary of State.

AM: And he fought the blog, the education establishment. Do you recognise the blob?

MW: Yeah, yeah, I recognise it and I fought them as well. A Blob which is resistant to change. I wouldn’t call it the Blob, but people who are resistant to change and reform you’ve got to challenge and fight and I think I’ve done that at OFSTED.

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