

Time for SAGE

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed much about how we do some things. COVID was, and still is, a massive negative but the way the British state reacted was, at times, inspirational and a success that the nation can and should be proud of. Britain did not get everything right. But the development of the Oxford vaccine, a story told by Professor Dame Sarah Gilbert and Dr Catherine Green of the University of Oxford in their book *Vaxxers*, was a huge success.

Another success story was SAGE, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies. They did not get everything right either. How could they? They were dealing with a virus that at first nobody knew anything about. Faced with a deadly mass killer for which there was no cure the scientists that made up SAGE, an organisation established long before COVID to deal with emergencies, came together and pooled their knowledge and experience. They produced in record time a huge number of papers covering every aspect of the pandemic. Unusually for SAGE, these were made public soon after they were written. *Education Journal* trawled through these and we published many of the papers dealing with education, so our readers will know just how good most of these were.

Advisers advise, but it is politicians that make the decisions and these were not always wise. Ministers had to think about more than just the medical science, but at least they had the best scientific advice available to them.

Politicians often don't want the best advice, despite proclaiming their attachment to evidence-based decision-making. The trouble with good advice from experts is that it may not gel with long-held views based more on ideology than the facts. Michale Gove famously decried experts. His educational reforms clearly were not influenced by them.

This is not a new problem nor is it one that particularly afflicts Conservative governments. In 2013 two of our leading political scientists, Professor Anthony King and Professor Sir Ivor Crew, published a book, *The Blunders of our Governments*, which catalogued the growing list of blunders and cock-ups that governments of all parties have made over the last four decades. They conclude that British governments are increasingly blunder-prone. It was not always thus. As the professors note: "Government in Britain was not only highly democratic: it was also astonishingly competent. It combined effectiveness with efficiency. British governments ... knew what they wanted to do and almost invariably succeeded in doing it." Nobody would describe British government like that today.

One of the most thoughtful think tanks today is the Institute for Government. Its research fellow, Sam Freedman, writes in this issue about levelling up and post-16 education and skills, high priorities for the Government. Looking at the *Levelling Up* White Paper he concludes that some of it is "wildly unrealistic" while other areas are "strangely unambitious". He puts the education plans in the former group. There are some good ideas in the White Paper and the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill which has just gone through Parliament with a fair amount of cross-party support, but also there are duffers.

Adrian Grove of Qube Learning looks with despair at some of the ideas behind the reform of Level 2 qualifications, which as he outlines in his opinion piece are leading to a national disaster. Mr Grove knows more about Level 2 qualifications than any minister, but whether they will listen to him is another matter. Professor Margaret Clark contributes another research article on primary school reading. She has long questioned the Government's fixation on synthetic phonics and the phonics screening check, but despite the evidence, for a decade the then schools minister Nick Gibb would not listen.

It is time to create an educational version of SAGE, perhaps the Standing Advisory Group on Education. This is not a new idea. There used to be a Central Advisory Council for Education. Its membership was broader than just scientists, representing a broad cross-section of education. It had many experts and much expertise within its membership and commissioned new research. Inaugurated by R A Butler in 1945, a time when British governments worked far better than they do now, it produced some impressive reports, including the Plowden Report on primary education in 1967. That was its last report as eventually ministers no longer welcomed its advice and it was abolished. It is time to bring it back.