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'Innovation depends on disciplined thinking'

Sir Michael Barber Interview

Interview by Fran Abrams

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According to Sir Michael Barber, there has never been a problem in getting education professionals to innovate. Given half a chance, he says, they will innovate here, there and everywhere. What the education system needs now, he says, is to inject a little discipline into the process.

Sir Michael is a man who knows how to get things done in an orderly fashion. For four years, until he left government last year to join the McKinsey management consultancy, he worked in Downing Street as head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit. Before that he was a professor at London University's Institute of Education.

He believes the key ideas now emerging from the Innovation Unit are good ones, but he warns its approach must be clear and focused if it wants to achieve real, lasting change.

"There's a bit of a tendency in the education system to think innovation means anything goes," he says. "Get the government off our backs and we will innovate all day long. But that's not what innovation is like. Innovation depends on disciplined thinking. "If you were a major business, say an engineering company, your ideas would go through a research stage, an incubation stage, a development stage, a testing stage. The Innovation Unit needs to bring that kind of discipline to the things it's promoting."

So is that happening? "It's moving in the right direction," he says. Back in 1997 Sir Michael made a speech in which he described four stages through which an underperforming education system would need to go to improve. It should move, he said, from what he believed was the "uninformed professionalism" of the 1970s, when teachers did their own thing without an adequate sense of direction, to the uninformed prescription of the early Thatcher governments, to informed prescription under John Major and then Tony Blair. Finally, he said, the profession should be able to move to a system of informed professionalism in which teachers would be able to make their own decisions on the basis of a thorough understanding of what worked.

We are, he says again, moving in the right direction. "But I think there is a long way to go. At the cutting edge there are some absolutely fantastic schools that

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have absolutely understood this, that aren't waiting to be told what to do by the government and that aren't sitting around complaining. They are just getting on with it."

He believes the unit's current focus on personalisation, on technology, on leadership beyond single schools and on greater collaboration between education and other sectors is the right way forward. But he feels one of the biggest enabling reforms to drive this change is the introduction of three-year budgeting, which will allow schools to plan much further in advance. He also believes competition between schools will help, rather than hinder, moves towards greater collaboration.

First, though, teachers must start believing they are the masters of their own fate. "The classic mentality of people in education was summed up by Tory former education secretary Keith Joseph when he said the first words a baby learned in this country were: 'What's the government going to do about it?' The profession has to get it into its mind that it is its own job to solve the problems of the education system."