

Are dark arts spinning out of control in Michael Gove's department?

When the Observer's political editor, Toby Helm, wrote a story last week about school sports he was attacked by a Twitter account linked to the Conservative party. The account has raised concerns within the party – yet the vicious attacks go on

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Last Sunday evening I took my two youngest sons to play tennis under floodlights in south London, as I often do. The game is one of their passions and has always been one of mine. It was cold but the match was good and quite close. Normally I comment on their play after almost every point, trying to improve their technique.

On this occasion I did so too but only until halfway through the final set, when I became distracted. As they came off court at the end and gathered up their things to leave, my youngest boy said: "Daddy, did you see a single point of those last few games? I think it was the best match we have ever had."

He knew the answer. Sadly, I hadn't. As they had battled away on court, my BlackBerry had flashed to indicate something had appeared on Twitter about me. Forgive me if a lot of this piece is about Twitter. It is a trivial name and often a trivial game. But for better or worse, Twitter has come to wield a power beyond its trivial title and sometimes, in my job, it cannot be altogether ignored.

What had popped up was a message from something called @toryeducation accusing me of suppressing information in a wide-ranging poll that we had reported in that morning's Observer about the Olympic legacy. Given that this Twitter feed, which I had not noticed much before, went under a semi-official sounding name, I responded angrily, ridiculing the claim. The very figures it suggested I had suppressed were all in a prominent graphic in the paper.

Then, throughout the course of a visit with the boys to a Chinese restaurant, an extraordinary exchange developed: @toryeducation went into personal attack mode. One tweet compared me to Labour press chiefs past and present: "You're like [Alastair] Campbell and [Tom] Baldwin – an activist not a professional hack." Another made the claim that I had relentlessly promoted entry into the euro during my 18 years on the Daily Telegraph, of all papers. "You were a Labour stooge at the Telegraph and always predicted UK would join the triumphant euro," said my new stalker on Twitter.

Just Twitter nonsense from an anonymous account, you might think, and I tried to think the same. But personal abuse on Twitter is hard to brush aside, as anyone who has suffered it will know. And more to the point, I could not help but make connections between the @toryeducation comments and other recent entries on Twitter in a similar vein from people close to Michael Gove, the secretary of state for education. Last Sunday night – and bearing in mind some recent ugly controversies involving the Department for Education – I began to suspect this all might, just might, be part of a pattern – that some kind of "black ops" campaign might be being run by Gove's supporters.

Surely not. After all, Michael Gove is one of the most courteous men in politics and, a former journalist himself, is one of the greatest supporters of freedom of the press. And why should the Gove camp go for the Observer? We as a paper have been open-minded, editorially, about his academy programme. The Observer was also the first newspaper to give his friend and supporter Toby Young a platform to explain and champion his plan to set up a free school. Certainly on the news pages we have gone on the attack over his policy on school

sport, but in a good cause and urged on by headteachers and many people in the world of sport.

As we report, Mo Farah and his wife, Tania, are as concerned as many others about the lack of an Olympic legacy in state schools. We have been critical, too, of Gove's determination not to apply standards on school food to academies. We are baffled why, in these areas, he does not appear to listen to experts in the field. But, particularly in the aftermath of the controversy in 2009 over Damian McBride, Gordon Brown's former special adviser, who was caught red-handed trying to smear senior Conservatives, and whose shameful behaviour prompted the special advisers' code to be rewritten to explicitly ban anything remotely similar being repeated inside government, surely it was unlikely that people close to power in either the Conservative party or the DfE could be indulging in anything remotely comparable.

There have been a number of episodes of heavy-handedness at the DfE. One such episode involves the former children's minister Tim Loughton, who was sacked in last September's reshuffle and who, since then, has criticised the way the department is run and claimed that the children and families agenda "was a declining priority" when he was in office. Last month the Spectator magazine quoted a "senior Department for Education source" hitting back, describing Loughton as "a lazy incompetent narcissist obsessed only with self-promotion". The source said: "Loughton spent his time pandering to pressure groups so they would praise him on Twitter. Loughton wouldn't focus on child sex abuse unless it was all over TV and the DfE now has to pick up the pieces." Strong stuff indeed. If these were the words of a civil servant or a special adviser they would represent a flagrant breach of his or her employment terms. A week last Tuesday Loughton wrote to the department's permanent secretary, Chris Wormald, demanding an inquiry and action against the person or persons responsible.

It struck me on Sunday and Monday that if a senior figure in the department could make such remarks about a Tory MP who had worked there as a minister until months before, it was certainly not inconceivable that the kind of attacks that had gone out quite regularly on @toryeducation might also be the work of insiders. This Twitter feed is always up to the minute on policy announcements, highly informed, and is very unlikely to be the work of some outside obsessive. It is swift with robust, politically charged comment and rebuttals, fiercely pro-Gove but at the same time often deeply personal.

I decided to look into it more. The Tory party would not initially comment and some days later said the feed was nothing to do with Tory HQ. However, on further investigation it turns out that @toryeducation is listed as one of only four members of the Twitterfeed account ConservativeHQ, which says it is "run by staff at Conservative party headquarters". I asked Gove's special adviser Henry de Zoete if he knew who was behind it and if he was involved. He responded by text on Monday saying: "Nope. Don't know who it is."

I trawled its past content and found an abundance of unpleasant material. The Financial Times journalist Chris Cook, who in 2011 had a scoop about Gove and his advisers using personal emails for official business, had been smeared repeatedly in tweets and retweets posted by @toryeducation. It retweeted a post from the mystery feed @stevhiltonguru saying Cook had asked a girl out and been declined and accused him of being a Walter Mitty character.

Other posts were more offensive. It took swipes at Alastair Campbell referring to "mental illness" and lampooned those who did not support Gove's policies while praising him to the hilt. If this were an inside job it would be an obvious breach of the rules governing DfE staff.

Despite De Zoete's initial denial, people kept on telling me they thought @toryeducation had to be the work of the special advisers De Zoete and his colleague Dominic Cummings. I

contacted someone very senior in the Tory party, and a holder of high office until recently, who said I could be sure it was De Zoete and Cummings. A former government member with good knowledge said he would "be amazed" if it were not these two. I was informed that a current adviser in the DfE had made it known to a friend that the two of them regularly went into their office, mobile phones to ears, to tweet on the feed.

Then came a breakthrough. I established from the most reliable of sources that in late summer 2011, when flak was flying on the feed about Cook, that the then Conservative party head of press Henry Macrory approached Cummings and De Zoete about @toryeducation because he was concerned that the material they were adding to it – in addition to acceptable material being written from Conservative HQ – was entirely inappropriate. According to the source the two special advisers gave Macrory assurances that in future they would tone down the material. It is believed that an approach may also have been made to Gove about the matter.

Last week, the editor of the Observer, John Mulholland, wrote to both Gove and, twice, to Wormald, asking them to investigate the account. He wrote to Wormald: "We have established beyond doubt that a senior Conservative party official, alarmed at the aggressive and politically partisan nature of the posts on @toryeducation news in late summer of 2011, raised this issue directly with education secretary Michael Gove's special advisers Dominic Cummings and Henry de Zoete. He also voiced his concern that some of the content was totally inappropriate, coming from anyone inside either the Tory party or the DfE itself. We understand representations on this issue have been made to those above."

An email was also sent to Cummings and De Zoete. It asked them to respond to a series of questions, including whether they had ever contributed to the Twitter feed @toryeducation or its predecessor, whether they knew who ran it and whether they had been approached by a senior Tory party official and told that inappropriate material was appearing, and in response that they had agreed to tone the material down.

Gove's response was short. "I note the anonymous allegations you make," he wrote. "It would be helpful if you could supply me with evidence for these allegations so that I can determine the appropriate steps to take."

On Thursday and Friday – in separate letters – Wormald, too, requested further information. De Zoete chose not to give direct answers to the questions put to him. Instead he said: "As I have already told Toby Helm I am not toryeducation." It was not an outright denial. If I was asked if I had written for the Observer I would say "yes" (or "no", if I hadn't) – not that "I am not the Observer".

Cummings's initial response was evasive. Despite the fact the Observer had never asked Cummings about the attacks that @toryeducation had made about Chris Cook, he seemed to know all about them: "I'm not wasting time on the tantrums of Toby Helm and Chris Cook over anonymous Twitter accounts. Am I supposed to take seriously anonymous accusations about anonymous Twitter accounts ridiculing journalists with too much time on their hands? I suggest that your advice to both of them is: take a Twitter detox because it's melting your brains, focus on what's important, stop behaving like eight-year-olds, and Mr Helm ought to reflect on the bizarreness of twittering foul-mouthed abuse at people while complaining about being abused on Twitter. What would David Astor make of that?" The "anonymous" Twitter account is, as mentioned above, one of the official member accounts of a Conservative HQ Twitter account; so not really very "anonymous". And if I have ever been foul-mouthed on Twitter I was wrong but I don't recall being so – just angry on occasions and firm.

When pressed further to answer the specific points about whether he had ever contributed, or been approached, by a senior Tory official about the feed, Cummings replied: "Of course I'm not this Twitter account and never have been, I focus on project-managing priorities, I don't waste my time on Twitter and you should tell your staff to do the same."

This, however, as we pointed out to Cummings, was an answer to a question we had not asked him – we never asked if this was his account, only if he wrote or contributed to it.

We pointed out to Cummings and De Zoete that neither had answered the specific questions we had put to them. In subsequent email exchanges, we asked them again to deny the two principal claims: that they write or contribute to @toryeducation and that a senior Tory official voiced concern to them over their contributions to @toryeducation over a year ago. Both declined to respond.

Answers, Mr Gove

Michael Gove needs to distance himself from the Twitter taunts emanating from his department

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When David Cameron came to power, he pledged to introduce an era of transparency to government. Out would go the dark arts, the spinning, the briefings and the poison that grew out of the toxic weeds of the Blair-Brown relationship.

Today, this paper alleges that a Twitter feed emanating in part, or wholly, from within the Department of Education is using its anonymity – when not dispensing perfectly reasonable policy analysis – to defame, disparage and damage political opponents and journalists. Contributions to the Twitter feed included taunting opponents about "mental illness" and retweeting remarks suggesting that a journalist had had a breakdown.

Are officials within Michael Gove's department sanctioned to deploy these tactics? Will he distance himself from the Twitter feed, or at the very least have it purged of this malevolence? Why have the representations of a senior Tory official about this Twitter feed been ignored by Gove's department for over a year? As a former journalist and defender of the press, is he happy for officials to be implicated in these attacks on journalists?

Time for some transparency, Mr Gove.