

# GENERAL SECRETARY'S ADDRESS



## General Secretary's Address

President. Conference.

It is my privilege to address you today.

A privilege to serve as your General Secretary - leading our fantastic team.

My thanks to the National Executive for their continued leadership on behalf of our members.

And I know that they will join with me in thanking every one of you – our lay activists and staff, and every teacher who has joined us and joined in.

And I want to take the opportunity as well to congratulate you, Rashida, and wish you the very best during your Presidential year.

Following in the footsteps of our first Black President, Michelle Codrington-Rogers - you are making history.

I know you will continue to affirm our position as a modern and inclusive union.

Celebrating our heritage and our diversity.

My thanks to every one of our activists in whose diversity everything we are is possible.

Always standing firm against all forms of prejudice and injustice.

Against racism. Against sexism and misogyny.

Never bystanders.

Always driven by our values in the pursuit of equality, diversity and inclusion.

### **Champions**

More than 60 years ago when my parents came to this country – they came here with little more than their hopes, dreams and a determination to build a better life.

They were a generation of pioneers – of champions.

They had an unquestioning belief in the power of education.

And they taught my brother and me that education matters.

That respecting your teachers is non-negotiable.

And, woe betide you if you didn't!

Yes, we endured racism. Every day.

But, our parents also taught us some valuable lessons.

Pick your battles.

And the best way to fight prejudice is through education.

It was Nelson Mandela who said: "Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world."

But teachers are the most powerful instrument for changing lives.

And teachers together not only transform lives – you build a better world.

### **Across the country, I have the privilege of meeting with our members who tell me about their passion for teaching.**

Who came into teaching to make a difference for all their pupils – black or white; disabled or non-disabled – regardless of background or ability.

Teachers who, every day, continue to be a source of inspiration and who have the capacity to be inspired by their pupils.

Teachers who are always learning – hungry to develop their knowledge, skills and to grow in their careers.

I meet teachers who are so invested they buy equipment, clothing and food for their pupils because so many families are unable to provide that support.

The teachers I meet have an unshakeable belief and optimism for their pupils.

They may sometimes feel let down, but they are never defeated and they never give up on their students.

Teachers tell me that what every pupil needs is a champion – someone on their side; someone who will fight for them.

They strive for the very best for their pupils.

Because you are the real champions of our children and young people.

And, you deserve our thanks.

**But teachers also tell me about the acute pressures they face.**

The anxiety they experience as a result of unreasonable expectations placed on them.

The daily fear of inspection.

The debilitating impact of workload.

The abuse and the discrimination.

They tell me about the lack of support for children and families and how more and more responsibility is being placed on them as teachers.

They tell me about getting into school by 7am, leaving at 7pm – working at home until midnight, and more at weekends.

They tell me that although teaching was their dream job, they would no longer recommend it.

Every day, I hear about the scourge of poor behaviour – verbal and physical assaults, online abuse, parental vigilantism.

Teachers being spat at, shoved, punched, kicked – even head-butted

They tell me that their classrooms are no longer safe spaces to teach or learn.

I hear from teachers who feel disrespected, overlooked and discriminated against by their employer because they are disabled, Black or pregnant.

Supply teachers who are undermined and undervalued every day.

But these members know the power of being part of the Union.

In the words of one of our members:

“Unions exist to protect their members and the NASUWT defended me.”

Or one of our leadership members – who was ready to give up her career because of racial prejudice, but who attended one of our events and came away inspired and re-energised.

**Every teacher needs a champion.**

To be part of a union that is led by teachers for teachers.

A union that will always put teachers first.

And, I'm proud that we will always champion the teaching profession - even when others fail to do so.

Never posturing.

Always doing the right thing.

Always putting the needs of our members first.

Locally. Nationally. Internationally.

With unparalleled support.

Information and advice.

Nationally accredited training and CPD.

Confidential benevolence assistance for members in financial difficulty.

Advocacy and representation for members when they have an issue at work.

Always striving to keep our members safe and protected.

Because that's what we do.

It may not always grab the media headlines.

It may not be what some politicians want to talk about when they talk about us.

But, it's what we will always do to secure the very best for our members and enable our members to be the best.

**You know, great teachers aren't made by governments in Holyrood or Stormont, or in Cardiff Bay or Westminster.**

They're made right here – in the NASUWT.

**Our union was forged out of a promise to teachers.**

To always strive, battle and fight for better for our members.

Last year, that battling and fighting won more than £14.2 million in compensation for our members in claims against unfair dismissal, discrimination and personal injury.

For the member who was head-butted and punched by a pupil and left seriously injured with acute anxiety and depression.

For the member who endured years of discrimination at work on the grounds of her race and Muslim faith.

To teachers like these and many, many more, we say: we've got you and we will stand with you – because you are our priority.

**And, there is no justification for a system that encourages teachers to be abused.**

Data we have seen shows that speculative complaints to the Teaching Regulation Agency's online portal have gone through the roof.

It seems abusing teachers is no longer confined to posting vile messages on social media.

Apparently, you can say what you like to the TRA, with impunity.

And the TRA – always touting for business – seems willing to pursue any bogus claim.

We've sought answers and instead we've been met with resistance.

Well, I say it again – we will not stand by whilst any of our members is falsely accused and unjustly treated.

We will hold the TRA to account for their actions and decisions

And those who are profiting from teachers' misery.

We are coming for you because that kangaroo court has to go.

**From individual representation to collective action.**

In the last year, we've led national disputes in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man.

And not just taking action, but also winning.

Winning improvements for our members across the country.

In Northern Ireland – an incredible campaign led by our members unlocked years of political impasse and secured the first pay deal for school teachers in three years.

In the Isle of Man – winning a 35-hour week.

In Scotland – securing a national Behaviour Summit.

In Wales – securing Ministerial commitments on workload reduction and to scrap the wasteful consortia system.

In England – a national Workload Taskforce and a national target to reduce teachers' working time by five hours a week.

And we also defeated the Government in the High Court in a landmark victory against strike-breaking.

It's certainly been a busy year!

But we didn't stop there.

We battled alongside our members where it matters – in their workplaces.

Picking our battles.

Running more than 10,000 successful individual workplace ballots last year alone.

No other union has ever done more than this.

Issuing notices for more than 270 days of strike action as well as action short of strike action against pupil violence, bullying employer practices, and workload.

But never asking our members to take action for action's sake.

When our members had no other choice, we stood side-by-side with them on picket lines.

And in solidarity with our members as they worked to rule.

We stood by our members in refusing to teach violent pupils.

And we faced down employers who thought they could bully and intimidate our members and get away with it.

Members in primary schools, secondary schools, special schools, alternative provision.

Members in maintained schools. In academies. In sixth-form and FE colleges.

And with our members in independent schools, too.

And to those members, I want to say this: you stepped up and we are proud to stand alongside you.

When independent school employers pleaded poverty...

Whilst holding millions in reserves...

When they used the egregious fire and rehire tactics of P&O to try to bully their way to downgrading your pay and pensions ...

... You took a stand. Winning victories and stopping them in their tracks.

Those employers should be ashamed.

And those members deserve our applause!

And, now, with our Time for a Limit campaign we are empowering more members, day in, day out.

Without needing to use the threat of industrial action, but ready to do so if we have to to ensure our members are able to work their proper hours and reclaim their contractual rights.

That's what it means to be NASUWT.

Not gesture politics.

Not token action.

Just hard graft.

And, always putting our members' interests first.

**This year, our national Teachers Poll and our latest consultative ballot of members in England asked members for their experiences and views.**

Because we always listen to and are guided by our members.

Our members' anger was clear.

Their message was also clear: we need change.

Change that can only come from a new government that is committed to delivering a new deal for teachers.

Because in the last 14 years, this Government has shown not one shred of care or concern for the teaching profession.

And whether it's three months or six months to the General Election, this Government has run out of time to fix the problems of 14 years of neglect and decline.

Underfunding. Chronic teacher shortages. Crumbling buildings.

This Government has given up.

They've given up on the thousands of SEND children missing out or being bussed huge distances just to get to school.

Given up on the 140,000 children missing from education.

Given up on fixing the crisis in children's mental health services.

Given up on tackling the epidemic of violent assaults in our schools.

They've given up on the 700,000 pupils being taught in unsafe buildings.

And the many more who are being taught in buildings without proper heating, ventilation, or riddled with asbestos.

And they've given up on solving the teacher recruitment and retention crisis, too.

And why?

Because they refuse to invest what it takes.

More than a decade ago, in our seminal report on Maintaining World Class Schools, we called then for greater investment, against a backdrop of just three years of government austerity.

But instead, the intervening decade has seen billions wiped off the Government's spending priorities for education.

In 2010, 5.7% of UK Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was invested in education.

Last year, that figure sank to just 4.2% – leaving us even further adrift from the UN's recommended figure of 6% of GDP.

Today, more school budgets are in deficit.

Local authority children's services continue to be axed as more councils are effectively declared bankrupt.

Family support. Early years provision. Mental health services. Youth services. Children's social care. All in crisis.

And now the Government is desperate for pre-election tax cuts, not the additional investment our schools and colleges need.

This is the shameful evidence of their wilful assault on children that will have grave and lasting consequences for a generation to come, right across the UK.

We cannot allow this to continue.

It would be a fantasy for the Prime Minister to believe that his Government will be able to count on the support of teachers at the General Election by simply riding out the next few months and doing nothing.

Rishi. Gillian. Your plan isn't working.

Even your threat of MSL legislation won't save you.

You know it. We know it.

2023 was a year of action.

This must be the year of change.

And the change that our members want can only come from a new government that is committed to delivering a new deal for teachers and a new deal for children's education.

**So, it's time for this Government to stop holding children and teachers to ransom and call the General Election now.**

Because we are ready for that change.

**Conference – we know the scale of the challenge any new government will face.**

We aren't naïve.

We're not asking for quick fixes.

Our members want lasting solutions that will repair our broken schools.

Fully fund our schools and colleges.

Stop the gravy train.

Crack down on those profiteering from children's education.

Deliver a national workforce plan to raise the status of teachers.

A National Commission on Teachers' Pay tasked with brokering agreement between government, unions and employers to:

- end the years of pay stagnation
- secure the long-term recovery and competitiveness of teachers' pay
- restore the independence of the pay review machinery

- secure a new national framework of pay and conditions across all state-funded schools

And make teaching the profession of first choice once again.

**And to every government in the UK – if they want the votes of teachers – they must use the time before that election to win your trust, Conference.**

So, in Scotland, let's see the Cabinet Secretary delivering on the Scottish Government's promises on workload and class size reduction.

And let's also see her being bolder with new measures to tackle some of the worst levels of pupil violence and abuse anywhere in the UK.

In Wales, let's see the new First Minister delivering on his ambition to unleash talent by stopping teacher redundancies, giving teachers the working conditions they need, and abandoning once and for all his predecessor's ill-conceived plans to reform the school year.

And in Northern Ireland – last month we saw the historic resumption of power-sharing off the back of the biggest public sector strike led by our fantastic members.

Let not that progress be spurned.

Let's see Ministers in Stormont doubling down and delivering the teachers' pay deal in full, committing to genuine progress on pay restoration and ending the injustice of second-class pay for FE college lecturers.

### **Remember our history**

And whilst we must demand more of ministers in every nation, we know that all roads inevitably lead back to Westminster.

For those of you with a good grasp of your trade union history, you'll know that our last Conference here in Harrogate took place a year before that fateful General Election in 1979.

A winter of discontent that culminated in one of the worst periods in our history – the election of the most hostile of governments intent on the destruction of our movement.

In 1997, on the eve of an historic election – this Conference highlighted the damage that had been wreaked on the education service in the intervening 18 years.

It spoke of the underfunding of our schools and public services.

The rising tide of pupil violence and indiscipline in our schools.

The negative impact of school inspection on teacher professionalism.

The Government's continued shackling of the work of the pay review body.

And the devastating impact of real-terms pay erosion, soaring workloads and spiralling working hours on the recruitment and retention of teachers.

Conference – you would be forgiven for having a sense of déjà vu.

**But, at that time we prepared for change.**

Change built on optimism and hope of a new government on the side of teachers.

Conference – you said it then, as we say it now: the next General Election must be a turning point for our education service.

A turning point for our schools and colleges – and most of all for children and young people.



“Education, education, education” was the mission of 1997 and it delivered.

Teaching became the profession of first choice for UK graduates.

We were at the table in social partnership securing a better deal for teachers, whilst others were happiest shouting from the sidelines.

And we secured international recognition at the first summit of premier league education nations worldwide.

But in 2010, the new government pressed the detonator.

And now, ministers want to lay the blame for this crisis at our door, colleagues.

As Gillian Keegan said to me at our last meeting: we should stop being so negative.

Apparently, the reason for the teacher recruitment and retention crisis is that we are not doing enough to talk up the profession.

My reply was simple.

OK, Gillian, come on then – come to Harrogate and tell our members just what you think of them.

Perhaps I could have phrased my invitation a tad more delicately.

But, she hasn't spoken to me since.

But look, Gillian, if you're listening, this isn't personal.

We know that you are in a long line of troubling Secretaries of State at the DfE.

Ministers who have refused to show up and face up to what they've done.

Michael Gove – who could forget him? – he refused our Conference invitation – maybe that was a blessing in disguise!

Justine Greening. Damian Hinds.

Gavin Williamson. Nadhim Zahawi.

Michelle Donelan (to be fair, she hardly had time to get through the revolving doors at Sanctuary Buildings and read my letter of congratulation before she quit!).

James Cleverly. Kit Malthouse.

And now, Gillian Keegan.

Have I missed anyone?

Oh, yes, Nicky Morgan – she did descend on this Conference in 2016.

I'm sure you all remember Nicky's promise to the profession – that she would end excessive workload.

We warned at the time that her warm words would make not one jot of difference.

And we were right.

### **14 years. 10 Secretaries of State.**

Ministers who don't even stick around long enough to see the job through.

And let's be clear, Conference – nothing has changed.

If any school anywhere in the country had a turnover of so many leaders in that space of time, it would be shut down.

Perhaps it's time for ministerial performance to be Ofsted graded.

That would see the end of single-word gradings soon enough!

But if that is leading by example, no wonder this Government is in the mess it's in.

**Conference – we want politicians who will stay the course and be champion for teachers.**

Politicians who will deliver a promise to secure the future of our profession.

**And I say this to Gillian Keegan and to anyone else who has ambitions to be the next Secretary of State for Education:**

You may not always agree with us.

You may not even like us.

But, even if you don't fancy being in the same room as us – you will still have to deal with us – one way or another!

### **A Brighter Future**

Our members want nothing less than for this to be the best country in the world for children and young people to grow up and be educated in.

When this Government dreams of sending asylum seekers to Rwanda, we dream of a country that treats everyone with decency, respect and compassion.

A country where a kid from a working-class background – a child from an immigrant background – can dare to dream and have every opportunity to fulfil their potential.

A country where teachers are fully recognised, respected and rewarded as highly skilled professionals.

With a government that puts teachers first.

Conference – our work begins today.

To be ready for the vote that matters.

To advocate.

To educate.

To organise.

And to press every politician ahead of the General Election.

With our Manifesto for Teachers.

To secure the change we want to see.

Because we are the champions of that change.

Because great education and a brighter future for children is made right here.

By our members.

In the **NASUWT – The Teachers' Union.**

Thank you!