

Persevilience

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November 2026

Alistair Campbell made his name as Prime Minister Tony Blair's leading adviser, and is now probably best known for his podcast double-act 'The Rest Is Politics'. In his latest book he sets himself the self-declared, vain ambition that its one-word title – *persevilience* – should enter the Oxford English Dictionary.

The essence of his case for coining a new word is that resilience, perseverance, persistence, patience just don't suit what everyone needs in this era of polycrises. He nicely references the Finnish word 'sisu', not a far cry from what he wishes to capture.

To kindly assist dictionary compilers ahead, he defines the noun persevilience thus: *'the ability of an individual, group or organisation to turn any situation, setback or meaningful experience into a positive opportunity to grow, to advance and secure their core interests and beliefs'*.

Reading Campbell's engaging canter through political, social and cultural events he has seen up close we meet the famous and the not so famous – from world leaders to asylum seekers – who in his terms have demonstrated persevilience. It's worth reading the book to find out why Alcoholics Anonymous and The Monarchy endure as his top examples of institutional persevilience.

Nelson Mandela remains his Patron Saint in this arena. Irresistibly, he applies the word to three Labour leaders he knows well: Tony Blair, Kier Starmer, Andy Burnham. And (wife) Fiona, family and friends are a recurring presence as he recounts moving personal tales, a number related to mental health.

The book set me thinking about leaders in education.

I have long argued that the best schools – and those who lead them - are *restless* to do something today a little better than they did it yesterday. And that, learning from Aristotle, excellence is the result of high intention, sincere effort and intelligent execution.

When I reflect on school leaders at work in their everyday, we might just make more than a passing nod to Campbell's new word. Why?

Teachers, support staff, pupils, families, governors expect leaders to not only resolve challenges which are presented to them, but to come out the other side with answers which take the school forward stronger and on an optimistic path.

Take teaching quality. No school is better than the sum of its teachers' work in classrooms. Leaders strive to ensure that continuous professional development enhances everyone's daily practices, helping the less experienced learn from those whose craft of the classroom is finely tuned.

Take curriculum design. Core beliefs about what constitutes a meaningful educational experience in classrooms underpin creative curriculum design. Leaders frequently need to reaffirm those beliefs when passing fads and fashions threaten to divert a school from its chosen path and core values.

Take national tests and examinations. Leaders recognise their vital importance to students and parents – they are the educational currency. Equally, leaders promote the spiritual, moral and cultural dimensions of schooling, those aspects which cannot be readily measured yet are so vital to producing flourishing young citizens.

Take attendance. This is probably *the* issue which presents setbacks to leaders as never before. The social contract of full attendance which previously existed between parents and schools is no more, yet leaders battle relentlessly to persuade families that children being in school everyday and on time really matters.

All of the above unfold against the 24/7 noise of social media, and its frequent misuse to harangue school leaders when parents and students do not agree with professional decisions taken and solutions found. And still school leaders press on, boats against the currents, with optimism and their strong sense of vocation.

Yes. I conclude that – certainly applied to school leaders - *perseverience* has my vote to enter the next OED. Alistair Campbell won't thank me for predicting this: we might just see the word emerge in the next Ofsted framework.

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