

Living up to the boast of being the “Party for Education”?

“ONLY the Liberal Democrats will deliver for our children” according to the Lib Dem website. Such statements form part of their branding as the “Party for Education”. Therefore, there was a distinct air of expectation at their Harrogate Spring Conference in March, as they unveiled and debated their radical new “Equity and Excellence” education policy for schools.

The main headlines of this were:

- axing the academy programme
- scrapping the 600-page National Curriculum and replacing it with a slimmed down Minimum Curriculum Entitlement
- introducing a Pupil Premium at a cost of £2.5 billion to bring the funding of the poorest one million children up to levels in private schools
- cutting class sizes in infant years to private school levels
- giving local authorities responsibility for oversight of school performance, along with powers of intervention
- passing an Education Freedom Act which would end the centralised micro-management of schools by the DCSF and halve the Department’s size
- a CPD entitlement of £500 per teacher per annum. Also, the General Teaching Council to develop a formal programme of CPD, requiring teachers to re-certify periodically, as in other professions.

Sponsor-Managed Schools

The Lib Dems would seek to replace the academies programme with a new, devolved model. All existing academies would become Sponsor-Managed Schools and would come under the strategic oversight of local authorities. Former Liberal Democrat education spokesman Phil Willis MP said at the conference that this was a way for organisations that are passionate about education, particularly universities, to become involved in schools. There is little specific detail in the policy paper about how sponsors would be selected or approved, though it does state that they would be selected on “the basis of their educational expertise and not their bank balances”.

Choice and diversity

Choice and diversity, as with Labour and the Conservatives, are central to many Lib Dem policy aims. The party would be in favour of parents or educational charities establishing local schools and would not oppose the opening of new faith-based ones. Though the policy states that local authorities would be empowered to oversee fair admissions in their areas, it does not address the problem of there being

little evidence that all people are equally able to exercise choice. Thus it seems unlikely that middle-class migration to specific schools would be mitigated.

Faith schools

Despite the fact that there were many revolutionary changes tabled at the conference session, many arguably requiring greater clarification, party members spent virtually all of the two-hour session heatedly debating the small section of the policy statement that related to faith schools, showing just how contentious this issue is.

The clauses on allowing parents to continue to choose faith-based schools and ending the opt-out from employment and equalities legislation for staff were uncontested. However, the motion also called for all state-funded faith schools to phase out selection by faith within a five-year period. After much debate, a compromise amendment was accepted which said: “All existing state-funded faith schools to come forward within five years with plans to demonstrate the inclusiveness of their intakes, with local authorities empowered to oversee and approve the delivery of these plans, and to withdraw state-funded status where inclusiveness cannot be demonstrated”. This is a much watered down and fuzzy version of the original text, which allows more room for manoeuvre for faith schools.

New agency

A further significant development would see the institution of a new independent and depoliticised agency – the Educational Standards Authority – which would take the lead in overseeing local authorities in their new role. It would also assess standards, approve qualifications and oversee Ofsted.

A poll that was conducted by the *Times Educational Supplement* and published in September 2008 found that Lib Dem policies were by far the most popular of all the main parties’ among teachers, and the new policy paper could go even further in cementing that support. In addition, away from its educational content, a welcome feature of the policy was that it showed how reforms had been costed and how they would be funded, indicating a real intent to make changes should the Lib Dems come to power. Whether such considerations could lead to a significant upturn in their fortunes at the next election remains to be seen.

To see the “Equity and Excellence” policy in full go to: www.libdems.org.uk/policies.

CASE believes in a fully comprehensive, locally accountable and democratic education system

Debating the big question of the day

Helen Flynn

CASE was invited to take part in the BBC Sunday morning debating programme, The Big Questions, on 19 April. The topic was originally "Should publicly elected officials be morally obliged to send their children to state schools?", but by the time the programme started it had expanded (rather presciently) to "Can you govern with a moral compass?"

As events have shown us, many MPs do not. But as CASE's representative, I put forward a strong argument that not only is it a sine qua non that MPs be ethical, but that there should also be structures in place to hold them to account regularly while in office.

David Davis, Conservative MP, demurred, saying that most MPs start off with a high moral stance, but that the "rigours" of being an MP tend to tarnish their early altruistic aims and values.

The MPs expenses fiasco has, in fact, shown us that many representatives clearly have lost whatever moral compass they may have originally possessed. Hopefully this debacle will yield a more ethical breed of MP, and produce a climate in which the case for "A good local school for every child" can become more resonant.

CASE AGM

Advancing Education in an Unequal Society – a way out of the recession?

Saturday 21 November 2009,
10.30 am

University of London Union

Details to be announced

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Membership

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Media frenzy obscures the real problems with teaching sex and relationships education

It was perhaps inevitable that the media frenzy over Alfie Patten, the 13-year-old teenager who had apparently fathered a child with his 15-year-old girlfriend Chantelle, should embrace a whole series of ill-informed attacks on our secondary schools for helping to create the "decadent moral climate" in which this sort of thing could all too easily happen.

The Sun's Jane Moore found the story of Alfie and Chantelle "a damning indictment on Britain's hugely expensive sex education programme in schools" (16 February 2009). The Daily Mail blamed it all on the "liberal establishment" which had betrayed our young,

The Mail's right-wing columnist Melanie Phillips went even further, arguing that it was all the result of an approach to sex education and contraception by schools and public health professionals that involve treating children as "quasi-adults capable of making their own life choices".

In her view, sex education programmes in schools are underpinned by a number of "destructive and nihilistic ideas" which are intended to "restructure family life around a sexual free-for-all". She claimed that the truth is that "sex education and contraceptive advice simply encouraged teenage girls to fall pregnant whenever they wanted to". And the result of this reckless and irresponsible teaching, she went on, is that "basic codes of decorum

had gone out of the window" and "children were having sex openly in the street like rutting animals" (Daily Mail, 16 February 2009).

A difficult subject to handle in the classroom

It is against this background of malign ignorance that our teachers are expected to create a worthwhile and enlightened programme of sex and relationships education for our children. Moreover, it has to be admitted that the story of the teaching of sex and relationships education in this country is not one of undiluted success.

Research carried out by Caroline Benn and Clyde Chitty for a report in 1996 on the state of comprehensive education in Britain found that sex and relationships education, which was often provided within a structured programme of personal and social education (PSE), was rarely given the priority it deserved. Where, as was often the case, little or no use was made of outside specialist staff, the task of handling a number of controversial issues in the classroom fell to tutors and others who had had no special training for the task. Moreover, with one or two notable exceptions, the 1500 or so schools participating in the Benn/Chitty Survey made no mention of "sexuality" in their equal opportunities statements.

Have things changed much since then?

A growing danger of conflicts of interest

The extent of private sector involvement in state education is growing rapidly and inevitably raises questions of potential conflicts of interest.

Standards in the state system are supposedly evaluated by school inspections carried out by Ofsted. When an inspection rules unfavourably for a school, current government policy is for that school to become an academy – a school with private sponsors and management.

The Ofsted inspection franchises, however, have been handed to five regionally based private monopolies, which Ofsted

the same companies are becoming the providers of education, the providers of educational resources, the examiners of educational outcomes and the judges and juries of educational performance

Box, Penguin Books and the Financial Times.

In partnership with Amey (a engineering consultancy company involved in Building Schools for the Future contracts), Nord Anglia formed "EduAction" in 2001 to run Waltham Forest Education, which it did until 2008. Nord-Anglia also ran Hackney education until that was handed over to the Learning Trust, which held on to some key Nord Anglia managers and still pro-

motes Pearson products (Knowledge Box) on its website. Nord Anglia has also run education services in Westminster.

It is normal and reasonable for parent companies and their subsidiaries in the private sector to support each other and deal favourably with each other. That is good business sense. In education, however, we have moved into a situation in which the same private companies are becoming the providers of education, the providers of educational resources, the examiners of educational outcomes and the judges and juries of educational performance. Can the interests of shareholders coincide with the interests of students, parents and local communities?

What is education for?

Keith Lichman

Education is a distinctive characteristic of human beings. While nature abounds with examples of creatures that initiate their young into species-specific survival skills, no other community of creatures engages in such a wide-ranging, systematic and extended induction of its youth into community knowledge and values. However, there has always been a tension in education systems between teaching children to think and act creatively and training them to take their place in society.

Socialisation

Education is part of the process by which societies reproduce themselves. The adult community recognises that the older generation must be replaced by a younger one and grooms the young accordingly. Education is the way in which a society prepares the young to take their place in that society. Since all but the most primitive societies involve a division of labour, an education that was only intended to carry out this reproductive socialisation would need to vary according to the student's intended future role.

How is the future role of the student decided? Historically, the division of labour reflected the divisions by social class, and the education that children received in turn reflected this. The idea

that the children of the lower orders should receive an extended education is a relatively recent innovation, and one that was only conceded reluctantly.

Education for autonomy

Another aspect of education is expressed through words like "entitlement", "self-fulfilment" and "empowerment" – words that appear in the list of purposes of the original National Curriculum document. This feature is quite different from "socialisation". It originates in the European Enlightenment, which coincided with the emergence of capitalism, modern Newtonian science and the development of the bourgeois state. Emmanuel Kant, for example, wrote, "Have the courage to use your own understanding – such is the byword of the enlightenment." From this standpoint, by teaching students to think rationally and for themselves, education becomes a means to autonomy for the student and as such is potentially in conflict with education as a means of preparing students for social roles.

The 1944 Education Act, with its tripartite secondary school system, clearly placed emphasis on socialisation and reproduction of the hierarchical class structure of the time. Those at the top tended to justify this deliberate perpetuation of privilege through education by talking of children having different natural aptitudes

which therefore needed to be educated differently. That view is still widespread, although it is not usually expressed as crudely as it was recently by a former Chief Inspector of Education, Chris Woodhead (*Guardian*, 12 May 2009) – "Why do we think we can make him [the working class boy] brighter than God made him?"

The comprehensive movement that emerged in some local authorities in the sixties and seventies was an attempt to undo the deliberate perpetuation of social privilege and hierarchy through educational selection. However, the movement did not gain support throughout the country and reflected right-left political divisions.

Reasserting class

The re-ascendance of the right in the 1980s began a prolonged period of clawing back what those at the bottom of the class system had gained through the Welfare State. Compared with the attack on social housing and the destruction of the miners' union, the 1988 Education Act was extremely subtle as an act of class war, but it proved to be very effective.

The Conservatives did not trust some local authorities because the comprehensive movement had begun with them. Therefore Local Management of Schools seriously undermined the funding that they could devote to education. The Inner London Education Authority was regarded as so politically untrustworthy that it was abolished, its expertise scattered and its schools handed over to inexperienced and sometimes uninterested local councils.

Funding schools according to pupil numbers, national testing, league tables and building up expectations of parental choice exposed schools to market pressures and forced them to compete with each other for their survival. With the additional pressure of the inspection system, most schools felt driven to seek students who would be most likely to aid their survival. Selection, streaming and setting, discredited by much educational research, once again became the norm.

The answer to the question "what is education for?" depends on how fair the social structure is seen to be. During the last 30 years, the gap between rich and poor in this country has widened. If the children of the poor are to be given better life-chances, education has to compensate for the deficiencies in education that arise from the limited cultural access available in poor homes. That means directing more resources and support towards the kind of schools that are currently being classified as failing. The choice and diversity agendas of New Labour and the Conservatives dress up the reproduction of the current distribution of wealth and power as parental empowerment, but since parental power is so unevenly distributed, it leaves the children of the poor where they have always been – last in the queue.

Comment

As we draw closer to a general election *CASE's* ideal of every child in every neighbourhood in every part of the country having free access to a good local school and a life-enhancing education is becoming ever more remote. After 30 years of free-marketeering, social inequalities are worse than ever and the strongest predictor of a child's educational success or failure in a deeply fragmented system is still parental income.

Every Child Matters is an admirable sentiment but the agenda is deeply contradicted by education policy that in effect perpetuates selection. Private schools, grammar schools, faith schools, specialist schools, trusts and academies provide different routes to selection, and each contributes significantly to maintaining the country's extremely hierarchical social strata.

There is no easy way to straighten a crooked system. Preventing schools from selecting their intake would be a start. Re-establishing local accountability through strengthened and re-empowered local authorities is also essential. Since the first responsibility of private corporations is to their shareholders, those companies currently taking over different aspects of education must be disengaged from the system. Since it would not be practical to

suddenly replace their services, a transitional programme should be begun to bring such services back under local democratic control.

National testing should only take place at the end of a student's school career. The standards and the examination system should be the responsibility of a government-appointed body with no private sector involvement. Schools in a local authority are best placed to understand their students' needs and should decide how to prepare their students for the final examinations by organising their own curricula and teaching programmes. Ofsted should be replaced by a sampling system of monitoring capable of offering support where needed and by a system that compiles and facilitates the sharing of best practice across the country. Schools deemed to be struggling in difficult circumstances should receive extra support and resources without the threat of closure.

The requirement for daily acts of worship in all schools should be removed. Understanding and learning about religions is properly part of the humanities curriculum, while a school's duty to provide ethical and moral guidance to its students should be entirely free from religious bias.

Keith Lichman

The Secretary of State and his shadow – comparing the similar

Alan Carter

The children's charity Barnardo's organises regular series of lectures relating to its programmes and campaigns. The series that has recently finished included contributions by Ed Balls and Michael Gove, the Conservative Shadow Education Secretary. Various interesting differences in educational policy were embedded in what they said.

Michael Gove

Michael Gove chose to speak about the impact of globalisation, identifying both its positive and negative aspects, and reiterating the belief that high educational standards are essential to help children thrive in a more competitive world.

He expressed great enthusiasm for the government's academies programme – I lost count of the number of mentions, but there were at least ten. He spoke about the waste of potential represented by the failure of children from disadvantage backgrounds, and stated that evidence showed that the performance of the private sector was better than that of the majority of state schools. (He did not dwell on why that might be!)

Gove waxed lyrical about the perceived success of American Charter Schools – praising their insistence on high standards of discipline. He sees them as a model for the development of more CTCs and academies. He also presented the Swedish "voucher" system as a great positive – as it gives parents more power and presumably promulgates an active "market" model for the education service.

One thing he shares with Ed Balls is an apparently schizophrenic attitude to empowering parents – advocating the principle while applauding the academies that destroy parent and community influence on the education service they are funding from their taxes.

There were not a lot of surprises. In brief, under a Conservative government we could expect an even more enthusiastic privatisation of the education service.

Ed Balls

The present government has spent much more on education than the preceding Conservative administration and it is not

surprising that much of Balls' lecture was spent highlighting some of the positive aspects of how they have been spending our money. Much of the remainder was about the things he still wants to achieve – which could be considered more risky territory for a government that has been in power for more than ten years.

His lecture, "Ensuring Every Child Can Succeed", was about what more government can do to ensure that those children who face particular barriers – including deprivation, poverty and special educational need or disability – are not disadvantaged. This was logical ground to occupy at a Barnardo's lecture.

The Secretary of State stressed the focus of the National Challenge initiative, which does – at long last – indicate a move away from funding schemes that directed increased resources to the most successful, such as the ill-fated Education Action Zones and the now almost ubiquitous specialist schools. The National Challenge targets those schools identified as "failing", according to relatively predictable criteria, and allocates additional resources to them – along with the usual implied threats to the tenure of key staff.

Unfortunately he considered that £400 million was an adequate resource to direct at the 638 schools identified in this scheme (it amounts to less than 7 percent of their annual budget). He sees conversion to academy status as the ultimate mechanism (a threat or a promise?) for these schools, but academies typically cost around £24 million each.

Perhaps he has taken on board the fact that the Audit Commission highlighted the much greater value achieved by the Excellence in Cities programme, which costs very much less than academies and supports schools within the local authority system. This may account for the fact that Ed Balls (in comparison to Michael Gove's vocal enthusiasm) only mentioned academies once.

In view of the fact that New Labour have followed many policies to the "right of Thatcher" and the Conservatives appear to be planting the banner of their policy even further to the right we may need to look elsewhere for policies closer to the views of CASE.

*CASE campaigns for the
right of all children to
the best in state
education, regardless of
their race, gender, home
circumstance, ability or
disability*

News in brief

Academy held up

A new academy could be prevented by legal action from opening this year. The Furness Academy in Barrow was due to replace three existing comprehensives this September, but a parent's solicitors have threatened to issue the Secretary of State with an injunction if he signs the funding agreement before the outcome of an appeal against a high court ruling on a new academy in Camden.

The value of governors

School Governors' One-Stop Shop, the organisation that recruits volunteers to become governors across England, has calculated the monetary value of the work done by school governors.

Contributing the equivalent of the nationally recognised rate of £16.50 per hour, for seven hours per month and nine months a year, the average governor, adds value worth £1,040 per annum. SGOSS reckons that there are currently about 310,000 school governors in the country. That makes their contribution to our education system worth £322,400,000 p.a..

The worth of governors

After considerable delays the Ministerial Working Group on governance has finally concluded its work, nearly a year after it first met. The review report is to be published this month.

Primary Review

The final report on the Primary Curriculum can be found on the DCSF website, with an executive summary at www.dcsf.gov.uk/primarycurriculumreview/downloads/primary_curriculum_execs_summary.pdf. Views are being requested, and should be submitted by 24 July.

Disabled children's voice

Every Disabled Child Matters (EDCM) is working with young people to produce a manifesto with the aim of influencing party policies in the run-up to the next general election. They want to hear from disabled children and young people about what they want to include in it. See www.edcm.org.uk/ypmanifesto.

Children's rights

A coalition co-ordinated by CRAE (Children's Rights Alliance for England), seeks the incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into UK law as the best way to achieve rights protection for children in all areas of their lives. See www.crae.org.uk.

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