

# HARD LESSONS FROM COALITION - A Review of Liberal Democrat Education Policy

- A Spokesperson's Paper - John Pugh

The one Lib Dem policy people could always remember was Paddy Ashdown's "Penny on Income Tax for Education." Liberal Democrats were the people who wanted to spend money on education. Sadly when in coalition we invested significantly in Education via the pupil premium there was little political reward or recognition and our support amongst those who took an intelligent or informed interest in education slumped. This paper is not an attempt to explain this but to move matters on by helping to develop policy which answers to the needs of current times and is consistent with the party's principles and best instincts.

First a warning

## **Educational Policy**

Educational policy comes in phases with one set of policies being seen as a corrective to whatever has preceded it. Witness how the Plowden Report and the gospel of child-centred learning which was a reaction to the formality and aridity of much post-war teaching practice was itself replaced by the more defined and prescriptive curriculum introduced and epitomised by David Blunkett.

Every policy has good aims and nearly every policy has identifiable weaknesses.

It would be nice if we could see these phases as some sort of dialectical progression where thesis and antithesis leads us to a more wholesome synthesis, but all too often we appear to see the simple rotation of trends and the paradoxical inability of educational policymakers to learn.

The obtuseness of those who control the ebb and flow of policy is a source of frustration to those professionally charged with implementing it- made all the more frustrating when the howls of protest from professionals are taken as clear evidence that the policies are sufficiently challenging and game-changing.

The handicap most educational policy makers have in learning obvious lessons stems not though from a stubborn sort of dogmatism but from a more understandable kind of carelessness.

The two most obvious variants of this are a tendency to miss or even dismiss contrary evidence and a proclivity to extrapolate incautiously from their own experience.

The first criticism is well illustrated by the jibe that what is required is policy-led evidence not evidence-led policy but the second criticism demands just a

little explanation.

It is normal and in fact important that people draw conclusions from their own education experience and figure out what worked or failed to work in their case. It is though both careless and incautious to assume that the same lessons apply to everyone across the board-regardless of culture, personality, gender, age etc.

It is careless and incautious to assume that the same educational recipe would or indeed should work in every context-irrespective of resource, background or family. People can be assuredly right about what worked for them educationally but insufficiently clear about why it worked.

Humility is not normally part of the mindset of the policymaker but a tendency to critique the inferences he or she has drawn from their own educational experiences, and indeed at times the very outcome, is more helpful than not. This applies even if the policymaker is a former professional.

There are universal truths about human beings and indeed general truths about the most obvious educational subject- children, but there is sufficient variance generationally, culturally, socially etc - to make us sensibly wary of extrapolation.

## **Coalition Policy**

Coalition educational policy while not being fully Liberal Democrat policy or Conservative policy had a clear direction and objectives.

Primarily it sought to address inequality of opportunity in society and to ensure the economic security of future generations through raising attainment in relevant skills. Improving the skill set of English children across the board and ending the non-achievement of a significant cohort of students was the plan.

It is important to note that this agenda is principally about the economic destiny either of individuals or the nation and that it is a relatively narrow, if crucial, agenda.

It conditioned many judgement calls about curriculum, exams, inspection and resource and was what Coalition ministers benchmarked progress against.

How successful they were in that endeavour is hard to establish as all educational policy is slow-burn working through age cohorts and often evidenced when the policymakers themselves have moved on to other things.

**What we do know however is what measures were taken in the pursuit of Coalition objectives and what the Coalition omitted to do.**

Broadly speaking this is what the Coalition did

- 1- Increased the diversity of schools and reduced markedly the role of local Councils in the school system - through the Academy and Free School programme
- 2- Allocated significant funding to poorer pupils
- 3- Modified the curriculum, exam and inspection system in an effort to 'raise standards'

We perhaps should overlook some attempts to interfere directly in day to day teaching methods as collateral "noise" -rather than policy as the general drift was to empower (free-up) schools, though not necessarily teachers in general.

Broadly speaking what the Coalition did not do was

- 1- Prioritise happiness and the ethical, social and spiritual development of children
- 2- Raise the morale and confidence of teachers
- 3- Give parents greater rights and involvement in the educational system- other than the extreme prospect of starting their own school
- 4- Break down the damaging division between technical, creative and academic education
- 5- Enable strategic oversight and control of local education provision and supply

The coalition may have wished to do some of these things but in single-minded pursuit of its primary objectives failed to achieve them and in some cases adopted measures that actually hampered their achievement.

I take it that 1-5 are worth achieving and that they are not incompatible with the underlying aims behind the Coalition agenda. In fact I would go further and say they are strongly conducive towards achieving the primary objectives of Coalition educational policy. What cannot be said with any confidence though is that the detailed policies of the Coalition served any of these other agendas well.

In ignoring, side-stepping, down-playing or paying mere lip service to these other important objectives I believe it can be shown that the economic security of individuals and the equalisation of life chances is put at greater risk and progress slowed down.

The choice is therefore not between an educational policy say that promotes economic security rather than well-being or that values academic rigour rather than technical competence but between an incomplete and unsatisfactory educational system and a rounded and complete one.

## **Total Education**

It is in the interest of all of us and Liberals in particular to advocate a complete education for the whole child- indeed for the whole citizen. Total education to

be effective for every child requires a broad curriculum, involved parents, committed and convinced teachers, an engaged community. It cannot treat pupils as isolated exam units performance-managed by a well-meaning state.

There is nothing woolly or abstract about total education indeed arguably it is the unspoken philosophy of our best schools whether state or independent.

The current government though is wary of parents, suspicious of teachers, disdainful of local democratic accountability and fearful of innovation and variety they do not license. Through a range of levers the Secretary of State has a far more prescriptive role in the daily running of a School than at any time in history. It is right that she holds educational institutions responsible for their outputs. What is not by any means obvious is the need to tightly control and prescribe processes.

Flexibility is seen as one of the attractions of academisation but this is because academy sponsors are currently, pro tem seen as trusted or at any rate compliant agents of government policy—indeed some major sponsors are donors to or members of the governing party. That trust does not extend to parents of academy children whose political leverage is sharply diminished.

Total education is institution and governance blind but is less likely to occur where a school ignores the parents or is not part of the fabric of the community or respectful of the professional instincts of its staff. Academisation can but need not worsen such relationships and is certainly not as currently conceived and promoted a panacea for their improvement.

There is however a clear issue of how we are to assess the right outputs and effectiveness of teaching and learning when we move the focus beyond raw examination results. There is always an issue as to how far even the most carefully designed tests capture the skills and learning we are trying to inculcate but there is clearly a bigger issue in evaluating outcomes that cannot in principle be measured by written tests. Social and negotiating skills, self-confidence, mental health and civic responsibility are all in this category. One might add practical and personal problem solving.

The difficulties in capturing success in fields like these is not a reason to down-value their importance— even to narrow goals like economic security. Equally they should not be used to cover up for illiteracy, innumeracy or scant progress in Stem subjects. In fact strong progress in less quantifiable dimensions of education would ordinarily be thought to correlate positively with exam achievement. The point is that exam success just by itself is not a proxy or certain indicator of overall attainment—total education. Historically and for good reasons gaming, spoon-feeding, cramming and rote learning are viewed pejoratively despite the fact that they all provably help to pass exams. Such practices and approaches are correlated strongly with some poor acquired characteristics.

The Liberal perspective on education is far more ambitious in its scope than the chalking off of exam results. It sees no conflict between raising standards

and broadening minds and accepts nothing less.