

POLICY WATCH

2009/11

13 February 2009

The Conservatives spell out where Labour is going wrong on skills

'[Labour's Failure on Skills](#),' the latest Paper from the Conservatives on skills and training is basically a re-airing of their [Skills Green Paper](#) from last summer but with a sharper edge; the chillier economic climate and more heated political winds have seen to that.

The charge is clearly laid out in the opening paragraph: "*eleven years of Labour has left the skills base in a very poor shape to cope with the economic recession.*" To some extent this is an extension of the current '*should have fixed the roof while the sun was shining*' metaphor; Labour should have sorted out the skills problems in this country over the last few years, particularly in the year of plenty following the spending injections of 2001 and 2004. Now we're left with a skills strategy that looks tired and out of kilter with needs of the day or so the Conservatives claim. "*Our economy is now shrinking, we're in an era of mass unemployment. Our training system should change to fit the times,*" as David Cameron put it.

If that's the charge, the Paper goes on to spell out four particular misdemeanours committed by the Labour Government that need to be taken into account.

First, the state of skills in Britain currently, described in the Paper as "*sorry.*" The evidence, it says, is all around. More NEETs: "*there are currently 783,000 16-24 year old NEETs, up from 664,500 in 1997 - an increase of 18%*" with the largest increase amongst the 16-18 year olds and concentrated particularly among young males. Less adult education: apart from the much publicised drop in adult learning, down 1.4m between 2003/4 and 2006/7, there's also been a decline in FE enrolments, "*down almost 7% from 2006,*" and a drop in numbers on LSC funded provision.

Even, and surprising given the fact that Labour claims to have '*rescued*' them, a decline in apprenticeships as well. The problem here is that a lot depends on how you tot up the numbers. Labour has repackaged Apprenticeships at different levels from Young to Adult but the Conservatives claim that some of these as well as schemes such as the programme-led ones, are not true apprenticeships, citing evidence presented to the Lords Committee Enquiry a couple of years ago to make their point. It's on that basis that they claim that apprenticeships are "*languishing under Labour.*"

Nor, in this '*sorry state of affairs*' has HE fared much better according to the Conservatives. The 50% target of young people entering HE by 2010 will be missed, widening participation has made little headway and the Paper goes on to say that when it comes to growth in numbers in HE, it's foreign students that are making up the numbers, up 21% since 2003/4 while "*the number of UK domiciled students has risen by just 2%.*"

Second, is the claim that *"we've fallen behind our competitors"* and as the DIUS Select Committee has identified, even if we did achieve most of the Leitch targets we'd still be playing catch-up with our competitors: *"going backwards compared to our major competitors in the OECD, not forwards"* as Chris Humphries of UKCES put it. The Paper cites evidence on adult basic skills to demonstrate this. In July 2007, the Government announced a new objective to help 95% of the adult population of working age achieve functional literacy and numeracy by 2020. Yet the Public Accounts Committee has recently reported that *"achieving this ambition would, however, only raise England to the standards currently achieved by the top 25% of OECD countries."*

Third, according to the Paper, *"Labour's top-down schemes are making things worse."* Not only does this result in systems becoming more complex and subject to constant restructuring but it does little to help secure a better fit between what employers and learners want and what they get. Most of the ire here is aimed at Train to Gain, a scheme *"created with admirable aims and intentions"* but currently failing to meet its intended purpose. The Conservatives have already pledged that they would *'refocus'* it more on to work-based training and apprenticeships particularly as they point out that even when employers are given money to support training as now, it isn't all taken up. *"Even after an £8m campaign promoting free courses, only a fraction of the training money is being taken up."*

Fourth, and perhaps most contentiously, the Paper claims that *"the Government's fantasy policies are not helping."* What is meant here, as the Paper goes on to argue, is that there is a gap between what the Government is saying and what is actually happening. The recent concerns about the capital building programme in FE is one such example; the Secretary of State's 10 January 2009 announcement about a national internship scheme another. The Conservatives claim this has no new money and no new places.

So what would the Conservatives do instead?

Most of what they would do was set out in their 2008 Skills Green Paper and has changed little in the interim. *"We will refocus the highly bureaucratic and ineffective Train to Gain scheme, strip out the burdens from FE funding and inspection and transform the currently ineffective young people's and adult careers service."* This would allow funds to be directly re-channelled in three directions: *"a massive expansion of the apprenticeship scheme;"* a re-invigoration of adult community learning through *"a major network of locally-based training provision;"* and the creation of an all-through, professional careers advice service.

In his speech, David Cameron pointed to three key principles driving this change in approach: *"we should scrap the bureaucracy, empower individuals and encourage new providers."* It's got a familiar ring to it at least.

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