

Policy Eye: (Election 2015)



Highlights of week ending Thursday 2 April 2015

(Welcome to Policy Eye, a nearly weekly additional service from Policy Watch offering a regular round up of UK education headlines and stories from over the previous 7 days and introduced to keep a special 'eye' on developments in the build up to the 2015 election.)

The week summed up

A shorter Policy Eye summary this week partly because it's a shorter working week but partly also because purdah is upon us meaning that there are now restrictions on Dept activity while the election campaign is on.

Most of the education news this week has come from the ATL (Association of Teachers and Lecturers) Annual Conference where Labour's Education spokesman Tristram Hunt warmed the hearts of many delegates by pledging to support a changing role for Ofsted which could see it operating within a more self-regulated system: *"I want to see an inspectorate that moves beyond box-ticking and data-dependence."* This may be some time away and not everyone's convinced but for the moment, it's issues such as workloads, teacher recruitment, funding, the dangers of social media and curriculum matters that have been concentrating minds. Teachers have many concerns, two delegates at the Conference for instance bucked the trend and spoke out in favour of the reforms to science practicals showing that issues often run quite deep. Easter is Conference season for many teacher unions and the next few days see two of the other big bodies, the NUT and NASUWT, also hold their Annual Conferences where no doubt many of the same issues will be hotly debated.

Education has so far not featured prominently in any of the speeches or launches of the current election campaign which by most people's reckoning has got off to a slow start. There's been the traditional trading of figures on tax rises, VAT and business rates, leaving us as the FT put it *"at risk of drowning in dodgy data."* That said the last three elections have followed a similar pattern and things may take off tonight when we have the seven-way debate of the Party Leaders, orchestrated perhaps but tackling four big election questions in set order. Views are mixed about how far such debates alter rather than reinforce perceptions but studies suggest that at least 25% of voters change their minds during the campaign so there's a lot to play for.

As for the policies, so far only Plaid Cymru has come out with its Manifesto committing for instance to a new all-through national curriculum, a new independent exams regulator and higher education *"in principle"* being free for all. Conservative and Labour Party Manifestos are due out the week after next by which time things may be clearer...or not.

Top headlines this week

- 'Exams put children under 'vile, cruel pressure,' head of Wellington says.' (**Monday**)
- 'Hunt: schools should inspect each other.' (**Tuesday**)
- 'Philip Pullman joins calls to scrap baseline tests for four and five year olds.' (**Wednesday**)
- 'Private colleges may face public fee cut.' (**Thursday**)

People/organisations in the news this week

- The Labour Party who launched its Business Manifesto promising among other things to introduce a Tech Bacc for 16-18 year olds, Tech Degrees and high quality apprenticeship standards elsewhere to help strengthen the talent pipeline into work
- Shadow Education Minister Tristram Hunt who listed a new Education Bill on vocational training and potential changes to Ofsted inspections in a number of prospective Labour education proposals in a keynote speech to the ATL Conference
- Plaid Cymru who launched its Election 2015 Manifesto promising among other things to create an independent exams regulator
- Sir David Greenaway, Vice-Chancellor at Nottingham University, who will take over as chair of the Russell Group from this September
- Sir David Bell who in the latest in The Conversation's State of the Nation series, reflected on the education reforms of the last five years and re-iterated his belief in the need for an independent body to help steer curriculum and assessment developments'
- The latest edition of the Institute of Education's London Review of education which focuses the current state of vocational education
- The Association of Colleges and UK Commission for Employment and Skills who got together to publish a guide on accessing labour market intelligence for college managers
- The AoC and AELP who called for Parliamentary scrutiny of the Employer Ownership Pilots scheme after it was revealed that recruitment was much lower than expected
- The Local Government Association who called for further devolution of skills funding and commissioning in the third and final report in its 'Realising Talent' series
- The Sixth Form Colleges' Association who were disappointed to discover that on the final day of this Parliament the government had rejected its pleas for VAT reform
- Ofqual who listed eight objectives in its latest corporate plan published this week
- The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) who have been selected to run the proposed new National Reference Tests that will be used to help anchor standards in GCSE English and maths from 2017
- The Education Endowment Foundation who announced five new 'research' trials covering maths, teacher impact and parental engagement

Tweet(s) of the week

- *"If every teacher influences school policy you get better results than Attila the Hun style leadership."* @TES
- *"I want schools to be kinder, more positive places to work where fear of Ofsted doesn't impact best practice."* Mary Bousted @ATL Conference
- *"Spoon-fed private pupils less able to cope at university."* @ed_ontap
- *"Spend six hours a week of family time to 'tame' a teenager."* @Teachit
- *"The quick dumbness of the instant. Simon Scharma on selfies."* @PD_Smith

Acronym(s) of the Week

- LMI. Labour market intelligence, what most good education providers need to help ensure provision meets learner and employer needs

Quote(s) of the week

- *"What I learnt from these visits was that few pupils at primary or secondary school knew their times tables."* The Schools Minister reflects on what he learnt from some school visits in his final speech before Parliament was dissolved
- *"What we need is to chart a course away –carefully, slowly, consensually—from the exam factory model of school improvement."* Shadow Education Secretary Tristram Hunt answers a question on Labour education policy in the Guardian's 'Ask a Minister' series
- *"Education is on the front page of our manifesto and should be an immediate priority in the next Parliament."* The Lib-Dems on education
- *"Perhaps the time has come to slay the sacred cow of progress."* NAHT general secretary Russell Hobby in his latest blog on the problems of pinning everything on pupil progress

Number(s) of the week

- 90%. The level below which student satisfaction shouldn't fall according to the FE Commissioner who listed 20 warning signs for college governors to look out for
- 300. The number of schools likely to be asked to participate in the new National Reference Tests announced by Ofqual

What to look out for next week

- Continuation of NUT Conference (Monday/Tuesday)
- The election campaign picks up from midweek onwards