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Pocket Watch – Commissioning election policy ideas

Introduction

This week Nick Clegg made two significant Lib Dem election pledges for the world of education. First he promised that his Party would ensure that the education budget was protected not just for 5-16 year olds as currently but for all age groups up to the age of 19, a substantive £10bn 'cradle to college' pledge given that this would mean bringing both early years and 16-19 provision into the safe haven of protected budgets. Second, that the Lib Dems would ensure that there was a properly trained teacher in every classroom as part of a new 'parental guarantee.' If the latter stole some Labour clothes, the former was certainly new dressing.

The merits of such pledges apart, and he also went on to promise more spending, they are a sharp reminder that this month the general election bandwagon rolls a step nearer as both major Parties start to review the ideas coming out of their various Policy Commissions that have been running for the last year or so chewing over ideas for 2015 Manifestos.

The Commissions are not the only channel through which election policy is channelled. Each of the Parties for instance has its own dedicated Policy Units, specialist advisers, backbench groups, friendly think tanks, independent inquiries and other stakeholder groups, all of whom add to the clamour but the Commissions, whose importance can vary, are very much a mainstream voice and many of them have a direct line into the grassroots. So what are these various Commissions and what have they been saying?

Conservative Policy Commissions

The Conservatives have had five Commissions, each chaired by a senior Cabinet Minister and covering: the economy; home affairs; foreign affairs; public services; and the environment and local government. These have been deliberately selected to mirror the Party's backbench committees and have been tasked with sourcing ideas and submitting them to two tests: costs and importance.

At this stage much of their deliberations are behind closed doors and have yet to be sanctioned by the inner circle election team that will sign off policy commitments. Broad themes however can be picked up from recent Ministerial speeches and announcements such as Michael Gove's recent Policy Exchange speech which suggested that school autonomy, albeit with 'proper accountability' remains a core plank in the Party's school reforms. Or Matthew Hancock's AELP Annual Conference speech which presented reform of the skills system around employer and local market needs as part of a wider modernising exercise of public services. But for those who want to understand the bigger picture, the five 'pillars' of the Government's long-term economic plan, first spelt out by the Prime Minister in March and now the centrepiece of its election strategy is as good a place to start as any and does include a strong education and skills component. The five are:

- Reducing the deficit
- Cutting income tax and freezing fuel duty
- Creating more jobs
- Capping welfare and reducing immigration
- Delivering the best schools and skills for young people

The next stage is for these and other ideas to be formalised and fed into the official script from this autumn.

Labour Party Commissions

Labour has had eight Commissions under the theme of 'Your Britain.' Three of these deal with different aspects of the Economy, including one on Work and Business, three with different

aspects of Society including one on Education and Children and one each on Better Politics and on Britain's Global Role.

Consultation documents from each of these were published earlier this year and the Party is currently pulling responses together with a view to developing final policy proposals. The language at this stage is fairly generic but offers some useful pointers. The Commission on Work and Business for example sets out the bones of an industrial strategy building on the 'four pillars' set out in the Party's Agenda 2030 (*"liberating the talents of all; innovating to secure our future; investing in the long-term; and building international engagement."*) It also has a strong commitment to skills training and development as identified in the Party's separate Skills Commission reports; *"we will build a new post-18 apprenticeship and vocational education system."* Further work from Lord Adonis's Growth Review, due to be completed this summer, and from the work on promoting local growth through City regions will also feed into this.

The Commission on Education and Children has also been informed by the various independent Skills Commission Reports notably those on 14-19 education and Apprenticeships so includes references to employer partnerships, the National Bacc and (College) Institutes of Technical Education but a key feature is the emphasis on fully qualified and trained teachers as part of a drive to raise standards. The Blunkett Report into managing the new school system was published after this Commission document was completed but there are references to local accountability, collaboration and performance management all of which were adopted by Tristram Hunt in the light of the Blunkett proposals.

Bit by bit therefore, election policy proposals are starting to take shape here too and as with the Conservatives and no doubt other Parties will start to emerge in official form over the autumn. The little matters of a potential Cabinet re-shuffle and Scottish referendum apart, the next big moment comes in the autumn with the respective Party Conferences when there will be much poring over words and phrases in an effort to spot the latest policy stardust.



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