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Pocket Watch – 6 (education) things we've learnt from the Party Conferences

Introduction

It was always going to be a different Conference season this year with all three major Parties having to adjust in their various ways to the realities of life after the May general election but what have we learned about the future for education and skills? Here are six observations.

Education and skills remains an important issue

It may not feel like one of the top policy issues at the moment but if the last few weeks are anything to go by, education remains an important priority for many. In the build-up to the general election earlier this year, education remained consistently in the top ten of voter priorities, coming in at number seven behind issues such as immigration, the NHS and the economy. According to the latest survey by Ipsos-Mori a couple of weeks ago, that has hardly changed. As if to emphasise the importance of education, it's been the Prime Minister who has been fronting education announcements of late whether it be the announcement of more academies and apprenticeships last month or tougher rules on school truancy this week. The government clearly sees education as an important part of its pitch for the so-called '*common ground*,' offering opportunity and aspiration to those hardworking families it so often mentions. As for Labour, it's early days, there was a brief reference to school accountability in Jeremy Corbyn's speech and the new Shadow Education Secretary has identified this along with teacher recruitment and funding as obvious targets as she starts to shape Opposition education policy. For public and politicians alike therefore, education remains up there as an important issue

It's (still) all about the economy

The economy remains the overriding issue for much of this Parliament and certainly in the case of the government the locus for much education policy. At the moment, most minds are focused on the Spending Review and what that might bring for education but we've heard a lot over the last few weeks from both major Parties about their wider economic plans for the future. For the Conservatives, George Osborne seized the headlines with his raid on Opposition territory for a man and a plan in the shape of Lord Adonis and the National Infrastructure Commission. This along with a promised '*massive transfer of power to local authorities*' and a commitment to legislate for a surplus for the future were the headline ingredients in his '*building for the future*' speech and will be of interest for much of the FE and HE sectors let alone those who argue for a more skills-based 14-19 curriculum. For Labour, John McDonnell was keen to demonstrate that there were alternatives to austerity, "*another world is possible.*" He duly announced a series of reviews including of the Treasury, Bank of England and HMRC, the creation of a new Economic Advisory Committee and a clampdown on tax evasion and avoidance. How far any of this would translate into a new skills agenda remains to be seen but he did interestingly stoke up a reformed BIS Dept as a key player in the future "*in charge of public investment, infrastructure planning and setting new standards in the labour market.*"

But social reform matters

Whether it's Corbyn's "*kinder politics, more caring society*" or Cameron's '*building a more compassionate society that leaves no-one behind,*' the Conference season has seen all major Parties attempt to add a heart to the economic head that has been determining government policy for so long. At present it's hard to get beyond the buzz words: aspiration, opportunity, mobility and so on but there are signs that it's beginning to drive some specific policies such as housing, social care, youth employment and of course education where the Prime Minister identified a lack of social mobility as "*another big social problem we need to fix.*" David Cameron's belief that a more autonomous school system, sharper accountabilities and the introduction of a National Living Wage will help solve the problem puts him at odds with the

Labour Party who have genuine concerns about all of those and especially about some of the specific welfare reforms. Social mobility is clearly one of the big social reform issues facing education at present as Ofsted, the Social Mobility Commission and others have been pointing out for some time. But there are others including: pupil welfare, safeguarding, children's mental health, children in care and how well we prepare young people for adult life, many of which were raised in fringe events over the last few weeks and which will continue to shape the education agenda for the foreseeable future

Schools of excellence

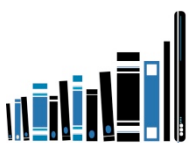
In the build-up to the Conservative Party Conference this week, the TES highlighted four "*major education crises*" facing the government namely: teacher supply, pupil numbers, 'rushed' exam reforms and budget cuts. These, plus concerns about early years and 16-19 funding were also raised in various forums by Lucy Powell, the Shadow Education Minister who used her major speech to focus on a problem that's proved thorny for the Party in the past: what to do about Free Schools and Academies. Her answer? "*There will be no more Free Schools and Academy chains will be made accountable.*" How the proposed new 'local oversight' will work, whether it will be the Blunkett model of local standards commissioners or something else, remains to be seen but the marker has been firmly laid. As for the Conservatives, the Prime Minister again committed to more of the same in terms of Free Schools and Academies and the Education Secretary to wraparound childcare during both term and holiday time, and more opaquely to "*educational excellence everywhere*" but how far all this has helped resolve the crises listed above remains open to question

FE still the forgotten middle child

If there's one sector entitled to feeling a bit miffed about a lack of political attention over the last few weeks, it's FE. There was plenty of talk around the Conference fringes about apprenticeships, skills training and local growth planning but when it came to platform speeches from the BIS Secretary of State and his Shadow, not a smidgeon. For FE therefore it's business as usual, battling to deliver the dual mandate of essential employability skills and higher-level tech skills while coping with shrinking budgets and a time-consuming series of area reviews. Significantly most government policy for the sector these days emanates from the Treasury, last week's release of a National Infrastructure Plan for Skills being just the latest example. It may be some comfort therefore that so many of the Treasury plans including the all-important Growth and Productivity Plans depend on the FE sector to be able to deliver them. How many, should become clearer when the Treasury announces its spending and growth plans next month

HE on hold

For HE, Theresa May's "*students, yes; over-stayers, no,*" speech was a sharp reminder that the student visa issue remains a hot topic and one that appears to be dividing Ministers as well. Overall, however, the sector remains a bit in limbo as it awaits the outcomes of two important Reports. One of course is the Spending Review where comments continue to pour in warning the government against savage cuts. Valedictory comments from the outgoing V.C. of Oxford and a blog from the Chancellor of Birmingham University this week being just the latest two examples. And the other of course is the Green Paper, given a pretty hefty trail by the HE Minister last month and due out shortly. Until the details on both of these are out and the implications clearer, HE remains in a state of uncertainty. Further uncertainty surrounds the Labour Party's position on fees where it now appears that the campaign pledge by Jeremy Corbyn to scrap them will be subjected to the Party's extensive consultation process. Quite what will emerge from what the Shadow Minister called "*a deep process of thought*" remains to be seen but it's unlikely to be quick.



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Conference Lessons 2015