

Policy watch

The major Parties place school reform high up their list of electoral pledges



Bit by bit the major Parties are setting out their respective stalls in advance of the general election.

The Lib-Dems kicked off first with four 'fair' pledges "*for how the Lib-Dems will make Britain a fairer place.*" These included: fair taxes; a fair start for every child; fair, clean and local politics; and a fair, green economy with jobs that last. Not to be outdone, the government used its recent spring event to draw up five 'fair' pledges of its own. In the words of Gordon Brown: '*first we must secure recovery; second we must support new industries and future jobs; third and fourth we must protect frontline services in health and in education; and finally we must stand up for the many and not the few.*' And last weekend, at their spring conference, the Conservatives topped things off with six priorities of their own: dealing with the debt; boosting enterprise; making Britain the most family friendly country in Europe; backing the NHS; raising standards in schools; and changing politics.

Pledge cards have become commonplace in recent general elections, they are a convenient way of communicating complex policy objectives to the electorate. But for those with an interest in education and skills, two points stand out from this year's lists: the concentration on schools and the lack of interest in adult skills.

It was ever thus of course, school reform plays to the wider electorate let alone media headlines in a way that adult skills does not. Equally many of the discussions around skills are being conducted elsewhere, around reducing the cost of government, empowering local communities and hunting down quangos. Yet since the Leitch Skills Report was launched four years ago, there's been cross Party support for its broad thrust, its targets are set to run for another decade and according to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills who have a remit to monitor progress on skills and will be producing a further audit shortly, we have a long way to go to achieve the world-class skill levels that Leitch sketched out.

All of which suggests adult skills should be higher up the agenda. There are after all some big questions that need asking such as what a future growth strategy should look like in terms of jobs and sectors, how best to secure a balance of contributions from those who benefit from skills training be they government, employers or individuals and how far the focus should be on defined skills rather than defined qualifications. Lord Mandelson has been one of the few leading politicians prepared to ask such questions. His speech launching the 'Going for growth' speech in January was a good example. In it he argued that "*how we create future jobs won't be the same as in the past.*" It's a fundamental point, particularly as other countries are busily investing in their own industrial strategies at present, but how we do it remains the question with few answers.

Meanwhile school reform is grabbing the headlines. All three major Party leaders have made set piece speeches about it over the last month or so.

In January it was the turn of David Cameron who spoke energetically about the current state of school education as he launched his Party's draft manifesto on schools. A month later, Gordon Brown stepped up to launch his Party's alternative to the Conservative proposals in the form of school chains, adding another target in passing, *"that by 2015, we will be in the top three in science and the top five in maths out of all OECD countries."* And just this week, Nick Clegg claimed that his Party was *"the only true Party of education"* in a speech on Lib-Dem proposals for a pupil funding premium.

All of the Parties therefore are lining up to display their credentials in this area so what themes emerging? In all there are four.

First teachers and teaching. All three Parties have been careful to express support for the teaching profession while appearing keen to raise the bar. In that and in their support for expanding the teacher base through organisations like Teach First and in beefing up continuous professional development there is little to choose between them. Where there are differences is over how to raise performance. Labour is intent on introducing a five year *'licence to practice'* scheme that *"will act as a guarantor of quality,"* while the Conservatives are placing greater emphasis on recruiting the best people, supporting them better in the classroom and introducing pay flexibilities; *"with our plans, head teachers will have the power to use their budgets to pay bonuses to the best teachers."*

Second, not just how but what is taught. Here the Conservatives have been developing their thinking for some time. Current features include: a reading test at age six; reform of key stage 2 testing, a stronger knowledge based curriculum, greater freedom over exam choice but more rigorous standards, a revamped league table system allowing for different forms of accountability, and support for technical education and technical schools. Michael Gove's speech to the Royal Society this week was the latest and perhaps sharpest iteration of where the Conservatives are in this area and included promises of an immediate post election *"overhaul"* of English, maths and science, abandonment of much of the primary review, allowing state schools to adopt the iGCSE and getting universities and professional bodies to act as guarantors of A level standards.

Third, giving parents a greater say. The Lib-Dems would make a deal with parents: *"you look after your children's education at home and we will make sure they get the best possible start at school."* The Conservatives would grant parents a greater say on school performance, on how schools spend taxpayer's money and of course in setting up new schools while Labour has promised that if parents are unhappy *"they will have a new right to initiate change in a school's leadership."*

All of which takes us to the fourth theme, school structures where the Conservatives remain committed to *"breaking open the supply of education and letting any one with a passion for giving children the best set up a new school."* This would include potential Swedish 'free' schools and an extension of the Academy blueprint. The other two Parties remain unconvinced. Labour is interested in a system of *"accredited school groups,"* kitemarked organisations such as universities, colleges, academy chains and independent schools who would take over struggling schools as part of its vision for 21st c schools. The Lib-Dems are arguing that *"we have to be realistic about reform."* The trouble is there's an election coming.

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