

Opening speech for the Federal Party conference motion on education, Monday, September 20th, 2010 By Cllr Peter Downes – see pages 6 & 7 for the motion and amendments

The Academies Bill was rushed through Parliament in July with a speed and urgency normally reserved for anti-terrorist legislation. In spite of that, the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords managed to bring about some helpful amendments, and they deserve our thanks for that.

However, the substance of the Act we now have on the statute book is potentially a very significant threat to the stability, fairness and viability of our educational system.

Before the election, Michael Gove was quite explicit: 'my aim is to transform state education in this country irreversibly for the better'.

However laudable the intentions, I think it is hasty and misguided to promulgate an irreversible reform of education within 11 weeks of coming into power.

In any case, Michael Gove's educational vision is based on a number of fallacies. I want to concentrate on just five.

1. He is very keen to liberate schools from ~~Local Authority control~~ Local Authorities do **not** control schools. They used to. When I first became a secondary school Head in 1975, the LA told me how many teachers I could employ and how many administrative staff. They organised the cleaning and the grounds maintenance. But the educational world has changed. LAs today do **not** control schools. It is the Head and Governors who make the vast majority of the decisions as to how the school functions. The LA is there to provide a whole range of services **and** support, including:
 - curriculum advice and challenge
 - coordination of admissions
 - the cost-effective provision of enough school places for children coming through the system.
 - very importantly, it provides the specialist support for children with acute special needs.

Clearly some LAs perform these functions more effectively than others but there is no justification for dismantling a structure that has an essential and invaluable role.

The greatest external interference in schools today comes not from local authorities but from central government:

- highly prescriptive national curriculum and shelf-loads of guidance
- an oppressive inspection regime
- an obsession with targets and putting schools into categories
- a never-ending stream of Education Acts and hundreds of regulations

Mr. Gove's accusatory finger of excessive control should be pointed at central not local government.

2. The second fallacy is that there needs to be a massive upheaval in the school system because of parental dissatisfaction with schools as they currently function. This is simply not true. The latest DCSF survey of parental views on the schools their children attend

shows that 94% of parents are extremely satisfied, very satisfied or fairly satisfied with the school their children attend. A very small minority have serious reservations. These need to be addressed, but there is no widespread demand for schools to be revolutionised.

IPSOS/MORI recently reported that 96% of parents want their children to go to a good local school within the Local Authority family.

There is no popular support for a root and branch reform on the scale envisaged by the Academies Act.

But we do need to reduce the performance gap between the highest and the lowest achievers and so we all welcome the Pupil Premium as one way of tackling this.

3. Fallacy no. 3 is that changing the structure of the school system raises standards. You call schools by another name and re-organise them and standards will somehow rise. The academic research on pupil performance gives a different finding. Dylan Wiliam, from the London Institute of Education, says: *It's not the school you're in that matters, it's the classroom.* So our national efforts should be focused on improving teaching and learning rather than on an expensive and distracting administrative re-structuring.

Fallacy 4 is the idea that academies and free schools are part of the localism agenda. Nothing could be further from the truth. I quote from the DfE web-site: 'The Young People's Learning Agency will fund, monitor, regulate and handle complaints about Academies'. This isn't localism . it is a massive centralisation of our school system. Incidentally, this concern is shared by Conservative councillors too.

5. The most dangerous fallacy of all is the idea that the principles of the market place can be applied to state-funded education. 'Good schools are expected to expand; free schools will provide competition so that under-performing or failing schools will have to improve their performance or wither and die.'

Just as the supermarket drives the corner shop out of business, so it will be with schools.

When Sainsbury's provides some new products to lure people away from their competitors, the unsold items in the failing shops can be returned to the wholesaler or sold off in a sale. But not so in schools. **Pupils are human beings, not tins of beans.**

My purpose in proposing this motion was to give you the chance to make a clear and unequivocal statement . academies and free schools are incompatible with the basic principles of Liberal Democrat Education policy.

I know that coalition isn't easy. My younger son lives in Brussels and if you think coalition is difficult in Britain, you want to try Belgium.

I am not seeking to rock the coalition boat. I understand, as we all do, why the coalition had to be formed. We accept that; we trust Nick Clegg, Vince Cable and their colleagues to do the best they can to uphold Lib Dem principles in difficult and unforeseen circumstances. We rejoice in what they have been able to do to implement parts of our manifesto.

But I put it to you, colleagues, that being in coalition should not require us to abandon the basic values, principles and policies that our experience, knowledge and collective wisdom, working parties have formulated over many years.

I have mixed feelings about Amendment 2. Of course it makes many important supplementary points with which I totally agree BUT I am disappointed that it deletes lines 16/17 of the original motion.

This is why I am calling on Liberal Democrats to use their influence at local level. I am not asking for hysterical, placard-waving boycotts. Just sensible, rational argument to alert people to the seven risks I have listed.

I think that lines 16/17 have been deleted because they don't want us to campaign, however unflamboyantly, on an element of the Coalition Agreement, our new Bible.

The good news is that the Coalition Agreement makes absolutely no mention of converting existing schools to academies and the paragraphs on 'new providers' does not specify that these will be outside strategic Local Authority oversight.

So the Academies Act is not a true reflection of the Coalition Agreement and therefore we must surely be free to point out its limitations and potential dangers.

Our message to our members, supporters and the wider public is simply this:

Liberal Democrats believe in

- good local schools for all,
- supported and coordinated by democratically elected local bodies;
- we believe in fairness and our priority is to support those in greatest need.

So I ask you to support the original motion, reluctantly without amendment 2, but don't just vote for it now and then forget it.

Go back to the places where decisions are being made. Talk to Heads, Governors, parents, teachers and councillors and help them to understand what is happening. Explain to them calmly, cogently and persuasively, that academies and free schools are likely to be divisive, costly and unfair. They're in the statute book, on the shelf, and that's where they should stay.

Lib Dem Education Speech in summation by John Howson

Conference

This has been an interesting debate and one that would not have been possible at either a Labour or Tory Conference. Education is something that many, if not most, Liberal Democrats feel passionate about, as we have heard from Michael Atkins of Lib Dem Youth, a first time speaker, Evan Harris, Sal Brinton and Cllr Kath Pinnock, as well as in the many interventions and speeches.

I want to start by considering amendment 1 (*details of the motion and amendments can be found at the end of this speech on pages 6 & 7*). I am agnostic about this, although I noted that the Minister of State said it was wrong; and can I compliment her on her speech. I leave it up to conference to decide how to vote on this amendment.

Amendment 2 is more tricky. Most of it re-writes rather than amends lines 18-31. As most of the original motion had to be written when the Bill was still going through parliament some of the changes might be a help. And like Peter Downes, can I pay tribute to our parliamentarians who secured important amendments to the Academies Bill.

But, despite everything Baroness Walmsley said, I have a problem with deleting lines 16-17 of the motion and inserting lines 9-10 of the amendment, what I might call the phone a friend at Westminster form of campaigning.

Conference, of course I want our parliamentarians to work within government and parliament. As I have said, they have already made a difference . but not on consultation where Clause 10(1) grants **sponsors** the right to consult ~~who~~ **they** think appropriate

But Conference, is this as far as you want to go? If someone is thinking of starting a ~~free~~ school in your area and you are;

- a parent,
- a governor,
- a ward councillor or candidate;

Do you want to know Conference is backing you or to restrict action to the Westminster bubble?

Conference, ours is a campaigning Party, both when in government as well as when in opposition.

If you want to restrict opposition to free schools just vote for amendment 2

But, if you believe the debate on our school system should be wider than just at Westminster . reject the amendment and vote for the original motion.

Because, as Peter Downes said in his opening speech:

This motion was carefully crafted to recognise that being in coalition should not require us to abandon our basic principles:

As Lib Dems we believe in

- good local schools for all, that are
- supported and coordinated by democratically elected local bodies; and a
- a system based upon fairness, that protects the most vulnerable.

What we don't believe in is an expensive and wasteful free-for-all.

Many of you in this hall joined the Lib Dems because of our education campaigns, ~~a~~ penny on income tax, better early years education, and a Pupil Premium championed as long ago as 2001.

Education has always been important to Liberal Democrats.

As you know, the Coalition's programme for government is based upon, Freedom, Fairness and Responsibility- that's what it said in the Coalition Agreement.

If you pass this motion, you send a message to the government that Lib Dem activists understand the challenge of government, but are not prepared to abandon all our principles.

We believe that government, an especially a coalition government, is for the many, and not just the few; for the future, as well as the present, and founded upon real principles.

Tony Blair thought the route to better schools was to give them all a new building; Michael Gove thinks it is to give them all a new name,

but Lib Dems know it is to work with schools, to inspire staff and pupils, to demand high standards in return for investment in teaching and learning, to have an appropriate curriculum, and to manage provision locally, not from Whitehall, and above all not to waste money we cannot afford pandering to the demands of the few whilst ignoring the needs of the many.

I don't care who runs schools, but I do care that those who do so recognise that public money is for the good of all, not the benefit of the few.

Colleagues from Wales and Scotland will no doubt view this motion with amazement. But I call on them join in voting for it in order to show everyone that the Liberal Democrats truly are the real Party for Education.

Delegates, I urge you to vote for the motion.

Motion follows on next page(page 6) and amendment 2 on the following page (page 7).

Free Schools and Academies - carried

Mon, 20 Sep 2010

Conference is concerned by the establishment of academies and free schools under coalition government policy.

Amendment in bold

1 Conference is concerned by the establishment of academies and free schools under coalition
2 government policy.

3 Conference re-asserts its commitment to the key principles agreed at the spring 2009 conference in
4 Harrogate in policy paper 89, Equity and Excellence, and specifically that:

5 i) Local Authorities should retain strategic oversight of the provision of school places funded by the use
6 of public money.

7 ii) Local Authorities should continue to exercise their arms-length support for all state schools funded
8 wholly or partially with public funds with particular emphasis on their work with
9 disadvantaged pupils.

10 Conference calls on government to ensure that schools remaining within the Local Authority
11 family are not financially penalised by the creation of academies and specifically:

12 a) That academies should be required to pay the full cost including administrative overheads for
13 any services they buy back from the Local Authority.

14 b) That academies should have only observer status on the Schools Forum as they have placed
15 themselves outside the democratic system for the funding of education.

16 In relation to free schools conference calls on all Liberal Democrats to urge people not to take up this
17 option because it risks:

18 1. Creating surplus places which is prejudicial to the efficient use of resources in an age of
19 austerity.

20 2. Increasing social divisiveness and inequity into a system which is already unfair because
21 of the multiple tiers and types of schools created by successive Conservative and Labour
22 governments and thus abandoning our key goal of a high quality education system for all
23 learners.

24 3. Depressing educational outcomes for pupils in general.

25 4. Increasing the existing complexity of school admissions and exclusions.

26 5. Putting at risk advances made in making appropriate provision for children with special
27 needs.

28 6. Putting in jeopardy the programme of improving school buildings.

29 7. Wasting precious resources, both human and material, at a time when all efforts should be
30 focused on improving educational outcomes by enabling effective teaching and learning to
31 take place in good local schools accessible to all.

Amendment 1 – carried and became part of the substantive motion

8. Increasing the amount of discrimination on religious grounds in pupil admissions and the employment of teaching staff, and denying children access to broad and balanced Religious Education about the range of different world views held in society.

Amendment 2 – defeated

Proposed by Baroness Walmsley

Seconded by Dan Rogerson MP

Amendment Two

10 conference representatives

Delete lines 16–31, and insert:

In relation to free schools, conference notes the potential risks to local communities that these pose, including:

- A. Creating surplus school places and hence inefficiency at a time of fiscal constraint.
- B. Affecting special educational needs provision.
- C. Increasing the complexity of admissions procedures.
- D. Disadvantaging parents who do not possess social capital.
- E. Top slicing the funding available for school capital projects.

Conference therefore urges Liberal Democrat Parliamentarians to work within government and Parliament to ensure that:

1. The requirement is maintained for all publicly-funded schools to follow a national admissions code agreed by Parliament and monitored and coordinated locally by local authorities.
2. Local authorities are granted responsibility for the regulatory oversight role of all schools in their area.
3. Capital funding for community school buildings and refurbishments is not prejudiced by the costs of establishing free schools and is a priority for further investment as soon as economic circumstances allow.
4. Any capital funding for new ~~free~~ schools is concentrated in areas where there is clear demand for new places, to reduce the risks of creating surplus at a time of fiscal constraint.
5. The SEN Review launched by the Minister of State for Children and Families explicitly considers how the interests of all children with SEN can be protected within an increasingly diverse range of school providers.

Conference further asserts that the most important step for improving educational outcomes, particularly for those from less privileged backgrounds, is through increased investment targeted at

those who need it most.

Conference urges the coalition government to set the pupil premium at a level which ensures all

children have the opportunity to succeed.