
Opposition Education Policies

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ABSTRACT This article examines some of the recent documents and policy statements on education policy from the two main opposition parties. It argues that, while we have reached the stage where New Labour and Conservative pronouncements on education are more or less interchangeable, the Liberal Democrats have made a genuine attempt to forge a distinctive and progressive policy of their own.

Recent Developments in Conservative Education Policy

It used to be the case (and this may not have changed a great deal) that mainstream opinion in the Conservative Party was firmly in favour of academic selection at eleven. Edward Boyle was forced to stand down as Conservative education spokesperson at the end of the 1960s because he was thought to be too sympathetic towards the idea of local experiments in comprehensive reorganisation. And Margaret Thatcher, both as Education Secretary (1970-74) and as Prime Minister (1979-90), made it clear that she hated the very idea of comprehensive education, and regretted, in an interview with the Editor of *The Daily Mail*, published in May 1987, that she had not done enough to stop 'this great rollercoaster of an idea' (*The Daily Mail*, 13 May 1987).

It came as something of a surprise, therefore, when new Conservative Leader David Cameron and the then Shadow Education Secretary David Willetts made it known in May 2007 that the Shadow Cabinet was no longer in favour of promoting the cause of the grammar schools. Former Conservative Leader William Hague had said that he wanted to see a grammar school in every town; but this was no longer viewed as a viable or desirable objective.

Addressing a conference of the CBI (Confederation of British Industry) on 16 May 2007, David Willetts said that 'academic selection entrenched advantage' and could not be said to benefit a broad enough section of the population. He went on:

For those children from modest backgrounds who do get to grammar schools, the benefits are enormous. ... We will not get rid of the grammar schools that remain. But the chances of a child from a poor background getting to a grammar school are shockingly low. Just two per cent of children at grammar schools are on free school meals; compared with twelve per cent of the total school population in their areas. (reported in *The Guardian*, 17 May 2007)

Instead of advocating the creation of new grammar schools, the Conservatives would be happy to 'adopt Tony Blair's Academies' – described by David Willetts as constituting 'a diluted version' of the Conservatives' City Technology College Programme – and 'run them better than would be the case under Gordon Brown'.

The Conservatives would make it much easier to set up new Academies, and this would include removing the requirement for outside sponsors to contribute £2 million. There would also be an insistence on a policy of whole-class teaching and setting by ability (*The Guardian*, 17 May 2007).

Interviewed on the BBC Radio Four *Today* Programme on 16 May 2007, David Cameron asserted that beginning 'a pointless debate about creating a few more grammar schools is not going to get us anywhere'; and he pledged instead to concentrate on raising standards and improving discipline in all England's 24,000 state schools. The Conservative Leader pointed out that history had shown that establishing new grammar schools was extremely difficult and often unpopular. It was his considered view that 'parents fundamentally don't want their children divided into sheep and goats at the age of eleven'.

A large number of Conservative backbenchers were apparently shocked to hear their Leader casually jettison what they considered to be a party 'article of faith'; and many of them used a meeting of their 1922 Committee on 16 May 2007 to attack the new policy on selection. It was pointed out that Education Minister Lord Adonis had recently conceded in an interview with the Right-of-Centre *Spectator* magazine (25 January 2007) that the closure of grammar schools in the 1960s and 1970s had been 'a backward step' that had simply 'reinforced class divisions', rather than doing anything to help 'those less well-off'.

Conservative anger may have been somewhat disingenuous in that, as David Cameron himself recognised, Margaret Thatcher had signally failed to engineer the return of eleven-plus selection in Solihull and elsewhere in the 1980s. And David Willetts had already hinted at a change of policy in a number of speeches delivered over the preceding twelve months.

In the event, David Cameron was forced to backtrack slightly, to the extent of conceding that population growth might dictate the creation of new grammar schools in an area like Buckinghamshire which had a strictly divided secondary system. And David Willetts soon had to give up his post to Michael Gove.

Observer columnists Andrew Rawnsley and Will Hutton found much to admire in the Conservatives' new education policy. In a curious article headed 'Good riddance to grammar schools' (*The Observer*, 20 May 2007), Will Hutton argued that grammar schools no longer served a useful purpose; whereas in his book *The State We're In*, first published in 1995, he had written that 'grammar schools need to be revived in order to attract members of the middle class back to the state system'. At that time, it had been his view that, although the grammar-school system could be divisive and reflective of the class structure, it was 'surely better than condemning public institutions to the second-class status that a middle-class exodus from them implied' (p. 311). In his 2007 *Observer* article, he welcomed David Cameron's 'brave education U-turn', and argued that 'grammar schools did nothing to advance the majority of kids'. At the same time, he was full of praise for the new Academies which, in his view, were 'state-funded schools modelled on independent schools to give disadvantaged kids the same chance as rich children'. They were all about creating new structures which permitted governors, heads and teachers to create 'an aspirational educational ethos' (*The Observer*, 20 May 2007).

Raising the Bar, Closing the Gap

A major policy document on education, with the title *Raising the Bar, Closing the Gap*, was published by the Conservative Party in November 2007. This was the first Policy Green Paper in the Party's 'Opportunity Agenda' and was described on the first page as 'an action plan for making opportunity more equal in our country by raising school standards and increasing the number of good school places'.

In his Foreword to the Policy Green Paper, David Cameron set out his vision of the Britain he and his colleagues wanted to see: 'A country where people have more opportunity and power over their lives; where families are stronger and society is more responsible; a Britain which is safer and greener'. He argued that Michael Gove and his team had developed 'a bold strategy for school reform' that stood in stark contrast to 'the top-down centralisation and endless short-term tricks' that had characterised Labour's ten years in office. During those years, social mobility had stalled and Britain had 'fallen down the international league tables for educational achievement'. In Cameron's view, all that was 'both socially unjust and economically inefficient' – it was also 'an unforgivable betrayal of our children's future'. In the Conservative view of the future, Britain was now entering 'a new era of personal responsibility, choice and local control'. People power was replacing state power, and democracy was replacing bureaucracy. This was to be 'the post-bureaucratic age'. The Conservatives believed in 'social responsibility, NOT state control'. They now recognised that 'there was such a thing as society'; it just wasn't 'the same thing as the state'.

In a section headed 'Empowerment through Choice', the Paper highlighted the success of countries which had apparently 'created choice and

flexibility through decentralisation'. The Swedish Government was said to have introduced real choice into the national school system, with great success. Money followed the pupil, so that 'parents were able to send their child to any school of their choosing'. And in the Netherlands, a quorum of parents could set up a new school to meet local needs if 'they were dissatisfied with what was currently on offer in the state system' (p. 7).

Throughout the Paper, it was clear that the Conservatives were anxious to emulate what they saw as the principles underpinning the Swedish model. All parents should have the power to take their child out of a failing state school and apply instead to a new independent state school – an Academy – operating outside local authority control. The money that had gone to the failing state school should be transferred to the new independent school. It was not clear what should happen to the 'failing' school, now devoid of resources: should it be encouraged to 'reform', or should it simply be allowed to close down? According to the authors of the Paper, the success of the new Academies in the London Borough of Hackney showed that what had worked in Sweden could also work here. The new independent state schools in Britain had deployed 'both managerial innovation and traditional teaching to generate superb results and attract new pupils'. Their undoubted success had 'acted as a goad, spur and encouragement to their neighbouring maintained schools, and a rising tide had lifted all' (p. 16).

Of all the issues dealt with in the Policy Green Paper, none received more coverage than Conservative plans for the future of New Labour's Academies. It was pointed out that Schools Minister Jim Knight had recently announced in the Commons that there would be 230 Academies opened by 2010 – and that this figure represented 'a poverty of ambition'. The Conservatives wanted to maximise both the number of new schools and the range of organisations supplying new schools. It was desirable that 'smaller not-for-profit organisations, as well as universities and wealthy charities, should respond to local need and parental dissatisfaction and be able to establish new Academies'. The ultimate aim was that most secondary schools should be released from the control of local authorities, 'in a bid to help disadvantaged children' (p. 38).

It was regretted that the current regulations on the kind of buildings that new Academies must occupy imposed large financial burdens upon them, with Academy buildings invariably being unnecessarily expensive as a result. A Conservative government would reform these regulations, along with the relevant planning rules, to allow a far wider of buildings to be used for schools (p. 41).

There would be an explicit Pupil Premium to increase per capita funding for 'pupils from deprived backgrounds'; and this Pupil Premium would attach to pupils directly. In this way, New Academies would have a real incentive to 'seek out and accept pupils from more challenging backgrounds'. And the existence of the Pupil Premium would enable Academies sited in inner-city areas to implement those initiatives which had been shown to improve attainment levels for children with limited facilities at home. In the words of the Paper: 'The

pupil premium funding would make it easier to establish extended schooling (from summer schools through Saturday schooling to homework clubs and breakfast clubs) which drives up achievement, especially among the poorest' (p. 42).

All new Academies would have considerable freedom to depart from the provisions of the National Curriculum. It was regretted that Secretary of State Ed Balls had sought to restrict Academies' autonomy in matters related to curriculum and assessment. Under a Conservative administration, the 'core curriculum' would amount to very little, and Academies could, for example, condense Key Stage Three learning in order to focus early on preparations for the GCSE (p. 43).

Finally, in a section headed 'Dismantling the Barriers', it was announced that local authorities must no longer be allowed 'to place constraints on the formation of new Academies'. According to the Policy Paper, it was often the case that the Department for Children, Schools and Families put pressure on local authorities not to co-operate with the establishment of new schools where there were surplus places in the local area. Where local authority schools were failing to attract parents and where those parents were 'moving across local authority borders in order to seek better schooling elsewhere', it was inevitable that large numbers of surplus places would arise. But, in the view of the Policy Paper, 'the existence of surplus places in a local authority area should no longer constitute any barrier to the creation of new Academies in that area'. The 'correct' response for a local authority faced with large numbers of surplus places was either to set about improving its schools to the point where they could attract pupils, or to reduce the size of the failing schools. Preventing the creation of 'new, good and competing schools' should not be available as a tool for local authorities 'wishing to evade their responsibilities by tolerating the existence of under-subscribed schools'. The Conservatives firmly believed that 'regardless of surplus places, parents should have the right to establish new Academies in their local area in order to raise standards and provide their children with the education they deserved' (p. 46).

The Policy Paper was concerned about *two* matters relating to all schools: grouping policies and pupil behaviour.

Where pupil grouping was concerned, it was pointed out that Labour's 1997 election manifesto had acknowledged the importance of setting by ability and had implied that, under a Labour government, the amount of setting in secondary schools would be increased significantly. But this had not happened: in 1997, only 37 per cent of academic lessons were set by ability, and this had increased only slightly – to just 40 per cent by 2007.

According to the Paper, evidence had clearly shown that 'mixed-ability' teaching did not work – and that, in such situations, teachers invariably taught to just below the average ability of the class, 'thus boring the most able children and baffling the least able'. This led to 'disruption, truancy and disengagement' (p. 32). But it is not clear what credibility can be given to the 'evidence' quoted in the Paper. Reference is made to a 2007 report from Conservative Party

Research, reported in *The Daily Telegraph* on 5 April 2007; and the only other 'authority' cited in the Paper is a somewhat obscure article by Professor Jim Kulik of the University of Michigan which appeared in the *American Educational Research Journal* as long ago as the Autumn of 1982. This apparently reported 'a rise in self-esteem', following the introduction of setting, among the 'lower ability children'. Despite this paucity of evidence, the Paper could state categorically that 'school children learn more effectively when taught with children of a similar ability' (p. 33). Under a Conservative administration, Ofsted would be given instructions to ensure that 'secondary schools – and particularly those not performing at high levels – set all academic subjects by ability' (ibid).

Finally, in a section headed 'Clear Boundaries, Instant Sanctions', the Paper had much to say about the problem of poor discipline in schools. Clear boundaries had to be set so that 'pupils recognised the absolute authority of teachers within the school'. Sanctions against those pupils who stepped outside these clear boundaries needed to be 'instantly and consistently applied', thereby ensuring that 'every pupil recognised the consequences of their actions'. Schools needed to be helped to adopt and implement the practices and approaches to discipline used in the 'best-performing schools' – and 'particularly in those schools situated in difficult areas or with challenging intakes'. It was argued that the Conservatives' 'Comprehensively Excellent' Campaign had clearly identified some of the behaviour policies which characterised the 'best-performing schools':

- dedicated staff whose main role is to enforce good behaviour;
- swift and timely sanctions applied when rules are broken;
- boundaries clearly drawn and an escalating scale of sanctions for those who transgress;
- dedicated rooms for those pupils who have to be taken out of class for discipline reasons.

Later in the Document, effective behaviour policies were spelled out in more detail, with the rider that not all these practices would necessarily suit all schools:

- strict school uniform policies, with blazer, shirt and tie for boys, and with a zero-tolerance of incorrect or untidy dress;
- extensive extra-curricular activities organised after school or in the lunch break;
- around an hour for lunch (as opposed to just 30 minutes in many weaker schools) – and with pupils not allowed to leave the school premises during the lunch break;
- a system of school prefects with a head boy and a head girl;
- the opportunity to highlight and publicly reward achievement, both academic and sporting.

It was emphasised that headteachers must have the right to exclude pupils where necessary. The large number of fixed-period suspensions, with many pupils being suspended more than once in a single year, showed that many heads were nervous about excluding pupils on a permanent basis. The right of appeal to an independent appeals panel administered by the local authority could result in proceedings which were time-consuming and stressful for many heads. One in four appeals was currently won by the appellant, and half of these children were allowed to return to their original school. Under a Conservative government, headteachers would have the power to exclude pupils, without the parents having the right of appeal to an independent appeals panel. The only appeal could be to the governing body of the school (pp. 25, 44). And this was a pledge reiterated by Shadow Schools Minister Nick Gibb in a series of media interviews he gave on 15 April 2009, the day that Sir Alan Steer's Report for the Government on School Discipline was published.

The overall message of this Policy Paper was said to be that 'there was no iron law which meant that deprivation was destiny and that a child born in circumstances of disadvantage must always expect to fall behind his richer peers'. If there were such a law, the Conservatives would wish to repeal it. And the whole point of Conservative education policy was to overcome 'entrenched disadvantage' (p. 14).

Developments Since 2007

On a number of occasions since November 2007, Conservative education spokespersons have been anxious to declare their support for Academies and for the steady privatisation of education. They have tended to emphasise that, under a Conservative government, the principals of the new independent schools would have considerable autonomy in matters relating to pupil selection and the ability to make long-overdue departures from the strict provisions of the National Curriculum, while, at the same time, being expected to follow a traditional line with regard to the grouping of pupils for academic subjects and classroom discipline.

In a speech to the Barnardo's Children's Charity on 9 March 2009, Michael Gove returned to the theme of 'overcoming entrenched disadvantage' by promising that a Conservative government would establish a new generation of Academy boarding schools to 'improve the life-chances of pupils from deprived backgrounds' (reported in *The Guardian*, 10 March 2009).

Yet while there have been many in the media who have welcomed the Conservatives' conversion to New Labour education policies, others have dismissed Conservative rhetoric about the poor benefiting from a richer choice of schools and have emphasised the potential for new class-based divisions. Writing in *The Guardian* on 3 October 2007, CASE spokesperson Michael Pyke said that it may have been 'courageous' for David Cameron to recognise that grammar schools did not work for the poor. 'It's just a pity', he went on,

'that he has been unable to see that neither do market forces in the guise of offering parents real school choice'.

In an interview with *The Daily Telegraph*, published as a front-page story headed 'Tories plan 'super' comps', on 7 February 2009, David Cameron said his colleagues were drawing up 'a great education reform Bill', to be introduced into Parliament if and when the Conservatives won the next General Election. This new Bill would make provision for a new generation of 'super comprehensive schools' or Academies, run by charities and entrepreneurs. The aim was to 'bust open' the state monopoly on education by putting 'rocket boosters' under Labour's floundering Academies Programme and drawing on the support of a new set of wealthy sponsors. It was made clear in the interview that the heads of these new 'super schools' – schools to which Mr Cameron would be prepared to send his own children – would have considerable autonomy in many operational matters, but would be expected to impose a policy of 'rigorous setting and streaming in all academic subjects'.

The Academies idea was given a further boost in 2009 at the Conservatives' Spring Conference in Cheltenham, held on the weekend of 25-26 April, where Michael Gove said that he wanted Academies to become 'the norm among secondary schools' by the end of the Conservatives' first term in government, suggesting that as many as 1,000 schools would be outside local authority control within a period of five years. To take the reform one stage further, thousands of primary schools would also be turned into independent, state-funded Academies during the Conservatives' first term in government. In an interview with *The Daily Telegraph* (25 April 2009), Michael Gove said: 'We are simply carrying forward the Blair Agenda in education to where he would have wanted to take it'.

The Conservatives' new education proposals received a good deal of publicity, much of it favourable. They were the main item in all the news bulletins during the BBC Radio Four *Today* Programme on 25 April 2009, and Michael Gove was given plenty of time to outline the thinking behind the recommended developments. The Conservative plan to extend the Academies Programme to primary schools was welcomed by Conor Ryan, Tony Blair's influential adviser on education, who urged Labour to adopt the proposal. 'Labour's Academies Programme is successfully raising standards in many secondary schools, and there is no reason why it shouldn't be extended to primary schools', he said (reported in *The Daily Telegraph*, 27 April 2009). And, somewhat predictably, an editorial in *The Daily Telegraph* headed 'Academies of excellence' gave warm endorsement to this latest idea for undermining local authority control of education:

The idea of extending the Academy principle to primary schools makes good sense. In many ways, the Academy ethos of state funding, combined with complete operational independence and free from the dead hand of local education authority control, is easier to achieve at primary level, where the schools are smaller and have more modest funding requirements. Mr Gove is particularly anxious

to see parental involvement in the creation of these new schools: this opens up a rich seam of talent and commitment that it is madness not to exploit. Such reforms will, over time, fatally undermine a monolithic state schooling structure that has failed far too many of our children. (*The Daily Telegraph*, 27 April 2009)

Schools Minister Jim Knight said the proposal would 'send a chill down the spines of parents', but former Education Minister Lord Adonis let it be known that he thought the Tory plan was a good one. He apparently felt that much of the momentum for the Academies Programme had disappeared since he was shuffled out of the Schools Department.

Equity and Excellence

The Liberal Democrats published their new 33-page education Policy Paper, with the title *Equity and Excellence: policies for 5-19 education in England's schools and colleges*, in February 2009.

Right from the outset, it was clear that the whole tone of this Policy Paper was going to be markedly different from that of anything produced by New Labour or the Conservatives. The Introduction began with a quotation from the writings of Nelson Mandela:

Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine. ... It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another.

The Introduction went on to argue that a good education should ensure that 'people discover a love of learning and are then encouraged to see this as a life-long process'.

It was, of course, true that it was essential to secure the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. But education was also about 'appreciation of the arts, music, sport and the humanities, and about developing the skills to understand and contribute as citizens' (p. 7).

It was acknowledged that English education at its best was 'a match for anywhere in the world', and that many children received a first-class education. But it was also true that educational success in England was highly correlated with family income, and that social mobility was lower than in almost every other developed country. England faced a number of very real problems to which the New Labour Government seemed to have no solutions. Around 20 per cent of children were leaving primary school with inadequate literacy and numeracy skills. Over half of teenagers were leaving school at 16 without five A* to C GCSEs, if English and maths were included among the subjects; and around 85 per cent of poor white boys were failing to achieve this benchmark standard. There was still a huge gap in success between rich and poor children

which actually widened as they went through the education system. As many as 55 per cent of schools in the more disadvantaged areas failed to achieve the Government's new benchmark of 30 per cent of pupils obtaining at least five 'good' GCSE passes (including English and maths); but this figure fell to just 3 per cent of schools in the more affluent areas.

The Policy Paper went on to declare that 'tackling the performance gap between children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds' was the Liberal Democrats' 'number one priority'. It was argued that TWO policy changes were necessary in order to address this all-important problem. Firstly, more money had to be made available to schools and colleges with 'the most challenging intakes', to give them a real chance to overcome deep-seated educational disadvantage. And, secondly, we needed to arrive at a situation where every community was served by a 'high-quality' local school, along with good family and social support services (p. 10).

To close the performance gap between children from rich and poor families, the Liberal Democrats proposed to introduce a Pupil Premium which would top up a national per-pupil base funding figure and would increase the funding for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. This Pupil Premium would initially be set at around £2.5bn per year and would be designed to bring the funding of the 'poorest and most educationally disadvantaged one million children' up to the average level of funding in private day schools. The children covered by this new scheme would initially include those:

- entitled to free school meals;
- with medium and low-level special needs;
- in the care of local authorities;
- with English as a second language (but probably for one year only, after which most children would be expected to catch up quickly).

One of the dominant themes of this Policy Paper was an emphasis on the role of the local authorities and schools in raising educational standards. It was powerfully argued that under both Conservative and Labour administrations, there had been a continuing focus on centralised 'traditional' solutions. The last two or three decades have been an era of 'standardisation and centralisation', with the emergence of what was, in effect, 'a nationalised system of education, micro-managed from Whitehall' (p. 21). Since the Labour election victory in 1997, there had been 16 Education Bills, 64 Green and White Papers, over 370 consultation papers and over 1650 new regulations. This worked out at one new government measure every two days. The Liberal Democrats would introduce an Education Freedom Act which would devolve powers from Whitehall to schools and local authorities – as well as to an independent Educational Standards Authority. This new Authority would take over much of the work of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority; it would be 'completely independent of ministers' and it would be accountable through a parliamentary select committee. It would also oversee the work of Ofsted,

which would continue to have an important role in assessing schools and colleges.

Much of the media reporting of this Policy Paper concentrated on the Liberal Democrats' proposals for the future of England's secondary schools. For example: the report in *The Times Educational Supplement* on 6 February 2009 was headed 'Lib Dems execute policy U-turn by pledging to axe academies'. In fact, the Paper actually proposed three main models of state schools, one of which was intended to replace the Academies model:

- Community Schools – schools which have no sponsor and where the Governing Body is selected from the local community;
- A new model of Sponsor Managed School;
- Partnership models, including 'soft' and 'hard' federations and the twinning of 'high performing' schools with weaker performers.

Sponsor Managed Schools, which would include all existing Academies, would now be under the strategic oversight of local authorities and NOT ministers in Whitehall. Local authorities, as commissioners of local educational provision, could select sponsors – which might include educational charities, parents, businesses and universities – but on the basis of their educational expertise, and not having regard to their bank balances. There would be no opportunity to select unfairly by aptitude or ability.

With regard to the existing 164 grammar schools, it would be left to individual local authorities to decide what should be done with them. It would no longer be necessary to carry out expensive and complex local balloting to decide their immediate future (p. 24).

Faith-based Schools would be allowed to continue; and new ones could be established where appropriate. The Liberal Democrats would ban selection by faith in new faith schools; and would require all existing state-funded faith schools to phase out selection by faith in admissions within a period of five years (p. 25).

In an important section headed 'Reforming the Curriculum, Improving Teaching', it was made clear that the existing, 'overly prescriptive', 600-page National Curriculum would be scrapped and replaced by a 'light touch' Minimum Curriculum Guarantee of around 20 pages. This 'minimum entitlement' would simply specify the 'core educational provision' which every school would have to make available to its pupils from the age of 7 to the age of 19 (p. 16).

The Liberal Democrats would take seriously the recommendations of the 2004 Tomlinson Report and create a unified framework of 14-19 curriculum and qualifications. It was felt that the Government had needlessly complicated matters by introducing 17 new Diplomas at four different levels to compete alongside A-Levels, GCSEs and the vast array of vocational qualifications. To maximise choice, students would be able to take a mixture of both academic and vocational courses within a single General Diploma (p. 17).

The Paper pointed out that the Liberal Democrats had always opposed compulsory national Key Stage Tests at 7 and 14 and would now scale back Key State Two Tests at 11, so that only the core skills of English and maths were tested, Costs would be reduced by employing a combination of internal teacher assessment and external testing.

There is much in this Policy Paper that many *FORUM* readers would wish to applaud; but there are still a number of proposals which give cause for concern:

- the future of the existing 164 grammar schools is left in the hands of local authorities which may well mean that nothing changes;
- the model of 'sponsor managed schools' could have many of the drawbacks of the existing Academies Programme;
- the position with regard to faith-based schools seems to be a rather messy compromise;
- the Policy Paper envisages a continued and important role for Ofsted in assessing school performance.

In an interview with *The Guardian*, published on 5 February 2009, Liberal Democrat Leader Nick Clegg made it clear that tackling social disadvantage and the lack of social mobility were so important to him that he would place his educational reforms *above* the Liberal Democrats' usual demand for a change in the voting system as a bargaining counter in the event of a 'hung parliament' after 2010 giving his Party the balance of power. In his words:

We have, after 12 years of Labour, one of the most socially segregated systems of education in the world, where the circumstances of your birth determine everything from your educational attainment to the length of your life. ... From the moment I was elected Leader, I have made the whole issue of genuine social mobility an organising principle for us. You cannot overcome inter-generational, class-based deprivation unless you start young; you have to give children one-to-one tuition where necessary and you have to dramatically reduce class sizes.

And this seems an encouraging and optimistic note on which to end; 'though it is not easy to see how, if the Conservatives win their expected landslide victory at the next General Election, the Liberal Democrats will actually get a chance to implement any of their education proposals.