
Hobson's Choice: education policies in the 2010 General Election

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ABSTRACT This article summarises the policies relating to families, children and education which were presented to the electorate by the three main parties in their manifestos, together with the policies listed in the Coalition's *Programme for Government*. The author concludes with a few observations on the future of state education in England.

Given that Labour had had 13 years in power, that the country had suffered a major recession, and that there had been widespread public disgust at MPs' expenses claims, it was surprising that, as the 2010 general election approached, opinion polls did not give David Cameron's Conservatives a bigger lead. The election looked set to be the closest for years and political commentators forecast a hung parliament with the Liberal Democrats holding the balance of power. Despite this, the three main parties all conducted what many felt were lacklustre campaigns.

The results of the election, held on Thursday 6 May 2010, were as follows:

Turnout 65.1%

Party	% of those voting	% of those eligible to vote	Commons seats
Conservative	36.1	23.5	306
Labour	29.0	18.9	258
Liberal Democrat	23.0	15.0	57
Others	11.9	7.7	28

With no overall winner, there followed several days of anxious negotiations between the parties. Finally, on 11 May, Gordon Brown resigned as Prime

Minister and the Queen invited David Cameron to form a coalition government of Tories and Liberal Democrats. The two parties had been supported by 59.1% of those who voted and by 38.5% of those eligible to vote.

The Department for Education

Tony Blair's New Labour government inherited the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) from the Tories. In 2001 they renamed it the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), and in 2007 Gordon Brown's administration divided it in two: the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS).

The coalition government has renamed the education department again. It is now the Department for Education (DfE) – as it was between 1992 and 1995 – with Michael Gove as the Secretary of State for Education. Sarah Teather (Lib) and Nick Gibb (Con) are Ministers of State in the Department, with Tim Loughton and Jonathan Hill as Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State. (Loughton is a Conservative MP. Hill is not an MP: he was Political Secretary to Prime Minister John Major until 1994; he is to be given a seat in the Lords).

Vince Cable (Lib) heads a separate department of Business, Innovation and Skills.

On 20 May the Cabinet Office published the Coalition's *Programme for Government*. The three relevant sections are 14 (Families and Children), 26 (Schools) and 31 (Universities and Further Education).

The Manifestos

What choices did the parties offer the public? The sections of their manifestos dealing with family and children's issues and with education inevitably displayed differences in approach and emphasis, but many of the underlying policies seemed remarkably similar.

The following analysis lists the policies of the three main parties summarised from their manifestos, and the policies set out in the Coalition's *Programme for Government*. The section groupings are mine. In each case the points show the policies of Labour (Lab), the Conservatives (Con), the Liberal Democrats (Lib) and the Coalition (Gov).

Families, Childcare, Nursery Education, Early Years, Child Safety

Lab: increase frontline spending on Sure Start; more free early learning places for disadvantaged two-year-olds; long-term goal of providing universal free childcare; childcare vouchers to be retained; more qualified workforce, more flexibility and choice in nursery education; vetting and barring system; social

work training to be radically overhauled; serious case review summaries to be published.

Con: focus Sure Start on neediest families; greater involvement of organisations with payment by results; 4200 more Sure Start health visitors; funding to be overseen by new Early Years Support team; flexible working for all parents of under-18s, shared maternity leave; free nursery care with range of providers; review regulation of childcare industry; control advertising to children.

Lib: 'bureaucratic' Early Years Foundation Stage to be replaced with slimmed-down framework offering range of educational approaches and flexibility.

Gov: take Sure Start back to its original purpose of early intervention; increase focus on neediest families; involve organisations with good record of supporting families; investigate ways of paying providers by results; pay for 4200 extra Sure Start health visitors by refocusing funding from peripatetic outreach services and from Health Department budget; free nursery care provided by diverse range of providers; greater gender balance in early years workforce; crack down on irresponsible advertising and marketing; tackle commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood; investigate a new approach to helping families with multiple problems; encourage shared parenting from earliest stages of pregnancy, including system of flexible parental leave; publish serious case reviews with identifying details removed; review criminal records and vetting and barring regime – scale it back to 'common sense' levels; funding for relationship support; increase use of mediation; greater access rights to non-resident parents and grandparents; reduce couple penalty in tax credit system.

Teachers, Recruitment and Training

Lab: Teach First to be extended; guaranteed continuous professional development for all teachers – in return they would have to demonstrate high standards of teaching to maintain their licence to practise; New Teacher Training Academies; 'golden handcuffs' to encourage teachers to work in challenging schools.

Con: heads could pay good teachers more; Teach First to be expanded; two new programmes: Teach Now (for people looking to change career) and Troops to Teachers (for ex-service personnel); teachers to have protection from false accusations; entry requirement for primary training to be raised; new graduates to need at least a 2:2 degree to qualify for state-funded training; student loan repayments to be suspended for top maths and science graduates while teaching.

Lib: expansion of Teach First and Graduate Teacher Programme; improved in-service training for teachers; qualified teachers for science at Key Stage 4 and above; national pay and conditions relaxed but minimum national pay award.

Gov: reform existing national pay and conditions to give schools greater freedom to pay good teachers more and deal with poor performance; support Teach First; create Teach Now to build on Graduate Teacher Programme; seek other ways to improve quality of teaching profession; give anonymity to teachers accused by pupils and take other measures to protect against false accusations; seek to attract more top science and maths graduates into teaching.

Standards, Inspection, 'Failing Schools'

Lab: strong school leaders to spread excellence; failing schools to be taken over by new generation of not-for-profit chains of schools.

Con: more rigorous inspections reporting on teaching and learning; schools in special measures for a year to be taken over immediately by academy provider; failing schools to be inspected more often, best schools less often.

Lib: establish independent Educational Standards Authority, replacing QCDA and subsuming Ofsted, to oversee school inspection and accountability.

Gov: simplify the regulation of standards in education and target inspection on areas of failure.

Schools Providers, Academies, Faith Schools

Lab: number of academies to rise; new 'co-operative trust schools'; no 11-plus or 'free-for-all admission system'.

Con: introduce Swedish-style 'free schools'; more academies in deprived areas; all schools encouraged to become academies with 'outstanding' schools 'pre-approved'; academies to have more freedom.

Lib: academies to be replaced with Sponsor-Managed Schools, commissioned by and accountable to local authorities; other 'appropriate providers' could deliver state-funded education; support existing faith schools and encourage the establishment of new ones; all faith schools to have inclusive admissions and recruitment policies.

Gov: new providers – parents, teachers, charities and local communities – to enter state school system in response to parental demand; all new academies to have inclusive admissions policy; work with faith groups to create more faith

schools; facilitate inclusive admissions policies in 'as many of these as possible'; publish past exam papers and performance data on educational providers.

Parents

Lab: dissatisfied parents could require local authorities to secure takeover of poor schools, expand good schools, or create new ones; parents at an individual school could trigger ballot on appointing new leadership team; School Report Cards to give parents information on standards, parental satisfaction, behaviour, bullying; consider giving schools overall grades.

Con: parents to have power to save local schools threatened by closure.

Lib: league tables to be reformed to give parents more meaningful information.

Gov: greater powers to parents and pupils to choose a good school; help parents, community groups and others come together to improve the education system by starting new schools.

Special Educational Needs, Deprived Pupils, Poverty Gap

Lab: schools to be 'held to account' for special educational needs (SEN) provision; improved statementing process; more teachers with specialist skills; local 'pupil premium'; free access to broadband for poorer families; short breaks for disabled children; improved foster and residential care; children and youth services to work with schools and colleges through Children's Trusts.

Con: moratorium on closure of special schools; 'pupil premium' to give extra funding for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Lib: guaranteed diagnostic assessments for all 5-year-olds; SEN provision and training for teachers to be improved; increased funding for most disadvantaged pupils – £2.5 billion to be invested in a Pupil Premium for heads to spend as appropriate.

Gov: improve diagnostic assessment; prevent unnecessary closure of special schools and remove bias towards inclusion; offer a 'significant premium' for disadvantaged pupils from outside the schools budget by reductions in spending elsewhere; maintain goal of ending child poverty in UK by 2020; reform administration of tax credits to reduce fraud and overpayments.

Behaviour and Bullying

Lab: Home-School Agreements to be strengthened; Safer School Partnerships extended; new providers for Pupil Referral Units; more money for anti-bullying

measures including homophobic bullying; specialist courses for teachers in promoting pupils' resilience and responsibility; more Cadet forces in state schools.

Con: support for teachers dealing with violent incidents and removing disruptive pupils; 'bureaucrats' would no longer be able to overrule heads on exclusions; home-school behaviour contracts to be strengthened.

Lib: behaviour to be improved by early intervention; training for teachers to prevent and confront bullying, including homophobic bullying.

Gov: give heads and teachers powers they need to ensure classroom discipline and promote good behaviour; help schools tackle bullying in schools, especially homophobic bullying.

School Buildings

Lab: rebuilding or refurbishment of secondary schools to continue under the Building Schools for the Future programme.

Con: (nothing)

Lib: schools to be offered loans to improve the energy efficiency of their buildings.

Gov: take measures to improve energy efficiency in public sector buildings.

Primary Schools, SATs and League Tables

Lab: more flexibility for teachers to offer 'broad, challenging and engaging education'; all schools to offer modern foreign language (including Mandarin); '3Rs Guarantee'; 8am-6pm childcare and 'constructive activities'; universal free meals pilot schemes.

Con: systematic synthetic phonics to be taught; reading test for six-year-olds; National Curriculum (NC) to be reformed – based on subjects and knowledge; setting to be encouraged; Key Stage (KS) 2 tests to be more rigorous; league tables to be reformed.

Lib: NC to be replaced with Minimum Curriculum Entitlement; KS2 tests to be scaled back, with greater use of teacher assessment; league tables to be reformed – more info for parents, less pressure on schools.

Gov: keep external assessment but review how KS2 tests operate in future; reform league tables so schools can focus on, and demonstrate, progress of children of all abilities.

Secondary Curriculum, Qualifications, Vocational Training, Apprenticeships

Lab: each pupil to have Personal Tutor of Studies; more individual and small group tuition for GCSEs; more single science subjects and modern foreign languages; compulsory, high-quality sex and relationship education to help to reduce teenage pregnancy rates; diplomas to strengthen status and quality of vocational study and bring together academic and vocational programmes; qualifications system to be reviewed in 2013; raise education leaving age to 18; Education Maintenance Allowances to be retained; new University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools; better careers advice; all suitably qualified 16-18-year-olds entitled to apprenticeships; advanced apprenticeships radically expanded; paid internships for some professions.

Con: all pupils to be offered separate sciences at GCSE; all state schools to be allowed to offer international exams; new technical academies to offer vocational education to engage young people and meet the needs of modern business; 20,000 more young apprenticeships to be created; schools and colleges allowed to offer workplace training; give small and medium enterprises a £2000 bonus for every apprentice hired; create a new all-age careers service; free colleges from direct state control.

Lib: NC is 'restrictive' and the split between academic and vocational qualifications is not working, so create independent Educational Standards Authority to oversee exams, inspection and curriculum; General Diploma to bring together GCSEs, A Levels and vocational qualifications; level playing field between academic and vocational courses; Train to Gain funding to be restricted to small- and medium-sized firms; off-the-job costs of adult apprenticeships, currently met by employers, to be fully funded for one year.

Gov: create more flexibility in exam systems so state schools can offer qualifications like IGCSE; improve quality of vocational education; increase flexibility for 14-19-year-olds; create new Technical Academies; set colleges free from direct state control; abolish some further education quangos.

Higher Education

Lab: expansion to continue; guaranteed help for low-income pupils; priority for science, technology, engineering, mathematics; economic growth sectors.

Con: promote fair access to universities, delay implementation of Research Excellence Framework and review it; consider Lord Browne's review into the future of higher education funding; provide 10,000 extra university places this year, paid for by giving graduates incentives to pay back student loans early.

Lib: university tuition fees for all first-degree students to be scrapped; National Bursary Scheme; 50 per cent university attendance target to be replaced with balanced approach including college education, vocational training and apprenticeships.

Gov: create more college and university places; foster stronger links between universities, colleges and industries; consider Lord Browne's report into higher education funding in relation to social mobility, student debt, quality of teaching and scholarship, proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds; review support for part-time students in terms of loans and fees; publish more information about costs, graduate earnings and student satisfaction rates; ensure that public funding mechanisms for university research safeguard its academic integrity.

A Few Observations

Academies

Given the widespread public disquiet about the imposition of academies, their lack of accountability to the communities they serve, the dubious nature of some of their sponsors, their high rates of pupil exclusion and their patchy performance, it is quite extraordinary that all three parties continue to promote them (though the Liberal Democrats did at least offer some minor improvements). Gove's decision to try to persuade thousands of schools to become academies is extremely worrying. Only last month Shireland Collegiate Academy in Sandwell was branded 'inadequate' by Ofsted. Before it became an academy, Ofsted had rated it 'outstanding' (Jessica Shepherd & Warwick Mansell, *The Guardian*, 28 May 2010). So why the obsession with academies?

Faith Schools

A poll of 6000 people in 2001 found that just 11 per cent wanted to see more faith schools (*The Observer*, 30 December 2001); a later poll revealed that two-thirds of those questioned agreed with the statement that 'the government should not be funding faith schools of any kind' (*The Guardian*, 23 August 2005). So why do politicians – of all parties – persist in offering us more of what we'd prefer not to have at all? And what are we to make of a government which says it is committed to inclusive admission policies in faith schools – but

only in 'as many of these as possible'? What about the rest? Surely if they're funded by taxpayers, the same rules should apply to them as to everyone else?

Free Schools

This is one of Gove's pet projects, based on Sweden's free school movement and the US charter schools (about which there are major concerns). Is there any evidence that the public wants these, any more than they want academies or faith schools? Every survey of public opinion seems to show that what people want is a good local school run by their elected – and therefore accountable – local authority. And will small groups of parents be able to jump the many hurdles they will face – an understanding of curriculum and pedagogy, employment law, building regulations, health and safety issues, etc.? In practice, many of these schools are likely to end up being run by private companies – for a profit. Gove has already said he has 'no ideological objection' to businesses seeking profits from the new generation of academies and free schools (Patrick Barkham & Polly Curtis, *The Guardian*, 31 May 2010).

Curriculum Control

How, I wonder, does Gove reconcile his many statements about 'freeing schools from central control' with his imposition of 'systematic synthetic phonics' for teaching reading? Every education report from Hadow onwards has urged teachers to use a variety of methods and warned against relying on one. Almost every expert on the teaching of reading opposes this policy, so what is it doing in the coalition's programme? Another generation of children is being used as guinea pigs to satisfy some ignorant advisor – or to make money for a textbook publisher. It's a disgrace.

The National Curriculum, we are told, is to be reformed (yet again!) In primary schools it will be subject based and – in a phrase that tells us everything we need to know about Gove's lack of understanding of education – it will be 'based on evidence about what knowledge can be mastered by children at different ages'.

To make matters worse, Gove has invited Niall Ferguson, 'the British historian most closely associated with a rightwing, Eurocentric vision of western ascendancy' (Charlotte Higgins, *The Guardian*, 30 May 2010) to help rewrite the history syllabus. Freedom for schools? I don't think so.

Homophobic Bullying

The coalition is committed to tackling bullying – including homophobic bullying (a policy which came from the Liberal Democrats – neither homophobia nor even bullying are mentioned in the Tory document). While this is obviously to be applauded, how will it be reconciled with the policy of increasing the number of faith schools, many of which – especially Roman

Catholic ones – are positively hostile to the notion of gay equality? Will such schools be forced to take action? Will they be told not to teach their pupils that homosexuality is a sin?

Incidentally, the parties' policies on behaviour and bullying make interesting reading: the Tories clearly come to the issue of behaviour from exactly the opposite direction to the other two parties. The emphasis in the Labour and Liberal Democrat manifestos is on improving children's behaviour; the Tories are apparently concerned only about sanctions and teachers' rights.

And Finally

I thought John Patten (Education Secretary from 1992 to 1994) was awful. (You may remember he was the one who wanted children to be taught about hell.) I have a feeling Gove is going to be worse – a truly dangerous man. His first bill – to create thousands more academies – is already causing controversy, because it abolishes the legal right of parents, teachers and local authorities to oppose such plans. The head of education at the NUT, John Bangs, commented: 'This is astonishing: it is more centralised than anything that Labour ever considered. There is no requirement to consult parents, staff or anyone locally when an academy gets set up' (Jessica Shepherd, *The Guardian*, 6 June 2010).

If Gove gets his way – and there is every indication that he will – will a recognisable state system of education exist five years from now?

Links

The following were correct on 8 June 2010: how long they will remain online is anyone's guess!

The Labour Party Manifesto 2010: *A Future Fair for All*

<http://www2.labour.org.uk/manifesto>

The Conservative Manifesto 2010: *Invitation to Join the Government of Britain*. <http://www.conservatives.com/Policy/Manifesto.aspx>

Liberal Democrat Manifesto 2010 *Change that Works for You*

http://www.libdems.org.uk/our_manifesto.aspx

The Coalition: *Our Programme for Government*. Cabinet Office May 2010. <http://programmeforgovernment.hmg.gov.uk/>

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