

Adult Learning: Beyond the general election

This note is adapted from a paper considered by the Policy Committee of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education on 25 March 2010. It is supplied for information only.

1. A general election for the United Kingdom parliament is imminent and the date may have been announced by the time the committee meets. If not, the absolute latest date a writ for the election can be issued is May 10th (for an election on June 3rd). Should it be called for May 6th (to coincide with local elections) the latest date for the writ to be issued would be April 12th. The period may, of course, be longer.
2. At the time of writing (15th March 2010), UK-wide polls have the three main parties at the following levels:
 - Conservative 37 to 39%
 - Labour 33 to 35%
 - Liberal Democrat 16 to 18%
 - Other 11 to 13%

These figures are such that the political outcome of the election is by no means certain given such factors as the distribution of seats between the different parts of the UK, the targeting and particular mathematics of marginal seats and the impact of smaller parties in key seats.

3. The four most likely election outcomes (not in order) are:
 - a majority Conservative government;
 - a majority Labour government;
 - a minority Labour government (with or without formal or informal support from smaller parties);
 - a minority Conservative government (with or without formal or informal support from minor parties).

This uncertainty means not only that the Liberal Democrats but also national parties in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland could have a significant and disproportionate influence on the next government.

4. A further factor for consideration is that one third of current MPs are not standing for re-election. Since a proportion of the remaining candidates will be defeated, it is possible that around half of the next House of Commons will be

made up of new faces. This means that the pool of experienced MPs available to any Prime Minister will be smaller than usual. This may well have a knock-on effect on the expertise free to fill select committee places and drive forward the work of all-party groups.

5. A number of NIACE's Parliamentary Patrons are among the group of members who are standing down or whose seats are vulnerable and one (Baroness David) has died during the course of the 2005 parliament. Members will wish to consider suggestions for their replacements at a future meeting.
6. The remainder of this paper attempts to summarise some of the implications of different election outcomes.

7. Conservative

- a. **Structures:** The shape of an incoming Conservative cabinet and government is far from clear. Michael Gove has developed a high-profile role shadowing children, schools and families to the extent that skills policy seems to be driven by schools policy. Ken Clarke shadows Lord Mandelson at BIS from the House of Lords but is also part of the Conservative Treasury Team led by George Osborne whilst David Willetts effectively shadows the portfolio of the former Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills DIUS and also leads on family policy.

It is possible to imagine a reconfiguration involving the creation of a Department of Schools and Universities; a Department of Skills and Industry and a Department of Children's Services and Family Policy - but this is no more than speculation. Discussions with front benchers suggest that while immediate legislation to reform to the Skills Funding Agency and Young People's Learning Agency is unlikely, the Skills Funding Agency would be changed to make it more like more like the Further Education Funding Council envisaged in Conservative green papers. It is also known that the Conservatives are committed to ending Regional Development Agencies in their current form, to establish an all-age Careers service and to cull a wider range of quangos than the current government.

- b. **Policies:** Conservative aspirations for adult education and skills remain as set out in their green paper of July 2008. (*Building Skills Transforming Lives*). This includes a commitment to end Train to Gain and redirect £100 million of spending to support young people not in education, training and employment and to establish a £100 million Community Learning Fund for colleges. Together these represent the largest spending commitment made by the party and, despite the recession, in January 2010, David Evennett MP confirmed "It is still our intention to create and Adult and Community Fund". Nevertheless, there are concerns about whether the party's welfare to work policy (*Get Britain Working*, October 2009) spends the same money twice! On university policy, the Conservatives propose to fund an extra 10,000 university places in 2010 by introducing an early repayment bonus on student loans, giving graduates a discount on outstanding debt in return for repaying ahead of schedule. By recycling money through the system faster, the intention is to fund at the frontline and cut graduate debt without increasing the burden on the taxpayer. Away from these specifics,

- c. **Budgets:** A key dividing line between the Conservatives and the Labour Party is their intention to make symbolic cuts in public expenditure in the course of the 2010-2011 financial year and to hold an emergency budget within the first 100 days if elected. Whilst there is a tension within the party between those advocating immediate reductions in public expenditure and the leader's reluctance to commit to this in advance of an election, there is little doubt that the Conservatives would give a higher priority to deficit reduction than Labour.

8. Labour

- a. **Structures:** With the structural reforms following the 2007 Machinery of Government changes not due to be implemented until April, it is hard to imagine that a Labour administration would prioritise further structural reform. Nevertheless, were Alastair Darling to be replaced as Chancellor by Ed Balls and/or were Lord Mandelson to become Foreign Secretary then a redistribution of portfolios is not inconceivable. This could impact on CLG and DCMS (were informal adult learning to be involved) as well as BIS, DCSF and DWP. Away from the Departments of State, the relationship between Jobcentre Plus and the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) as 'next steps' agencies rather than non-departmental public bodies will be an important one. Similarly, the relationship between SFA and place-centred bodies (whether RDAs or local authorities) will be crucial. Beyond that, there will be a widely-expected contraction of sector skills councils and the number of education and training quangos.
- b. **Policies:** If a Labour government is returned it would be unlikely that there would be major changes of direction from current policies - in particular the broad Leitch analysis as interpreted by UKCES. At present it is possible to think of adult skills policy (as distinct from that for 14-19 year-olds) as being linked with both welfare to work (through the concept of integrated employment and skills) and also to higher education (through a post-initial or tertiary education concept). If the balance between the three were to change it could have implications for NIACE and its members - as would developments in industrial/innovation policies which the government has developed across Departments under the label or brand of *Building Britain's Future*.
- c. **Budgets:** Contacts within Whitehall have commented that the current spending review 'feels' more like a more rigorous CSR and there is little doubt that public spending will contract in real terms over the lifetime of the new parliament with the biggest squeeze likely in 2012-13. At present, the Government is resisting immediate reductions so as to minimise the risks to the recovery from recession. Since the current deficit appears to be lower than anticipated it is even possible that the Chancellor will announce some new spending in the pre-election budget - possibly measures to combat unemployment among school leavers and new graduates [*NB this text was drafted before the Budget statement*]. Beyond this, education has not been promised any special protection and the higher education sector, in particular, has been warned that the reductions announced late in 2009 will not be the last. This makes it all but inevitable that the Browne Review of HE funding will lift the cap on tuition fees for full-time

undergraduate studies. The Banks Review of FE fees and funding is considered elsewhere on this agenda but is highly likely to lead to requirements for greater co-investment. Although the numbers of 16 year-olds in the UK population will decline year-on-year by half a million over the coming decade compared to the previous one, the potential 'demographic dividend' that might have been released for adult continuing education will be eaten up by the costs of raising of the initial learning leaving age to 18.

9. Liberal Democrats

- a. **Structures:** Like the Conservatives, the party's front bench continues to have shadows for Innovation, Universities and Skills and Business and Enterprise rather than the BIS superministry.

It is likely that any influence that the Liberal Democrats would have over the structures of government will be at a more macro-level than post-initial education and training. It is worth noting however that in the Autumn of 2009, the party committed itself to the abolition of Regional Development Agencies.

- b. **Policies:** The difficulty of needing to unseat incumbent Conservatives in most southern seats and incumbent Labour MPs in northern English seats poses a particular challenge to Liberal Democrats in policy formation. Although there is a commitment to a tertiary system, the policy debate within the party tends to focus on schools and universities (particularly a continued reluctance to accept the continuation of variable tuition fees for English higher education) more than further education and adult learning. This is despite repeated support for a broader agenda from front-benchers.
- c. **Budgets:** The Liberal Democrats' position on public expenditure is closer to that of the current government more than the opposition. It is also noteworthy that the Shadow Chancellor, Vince Cable has long been a vocal and informed supporter of adult learning.

Conclusion

10. At the time of writing it is possible that the election will result in a hung parliament. This will present new opportunities for NIACE to promote the contributions that adult learning can make to public policy but also new risks of marginalisation.

NIACE
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