

## Policy watch

What does the coalition agreement mean for the world of education?



Labelled in the Times *"a fascinating mix of radical reforms and policy fudges,"* the working agreement between the Conservatives and the Lib-Dems released last week now effectively takes over from the Party Manifestos as the guide to future policy, potentially for the next five years. Based by all accounts on the German approach to coalition government, the agreement between the two Parties sets out the working arrangements for eleven of the more crunching policy areas. Intriguingly, it sets out not just where they are agree but equally where they don't. This for instance is how they will play that tricky bone of contention, the Trident defence question. *"The government will be committed to the maintenance of Britain's nuclear deterrent and have argued that the renewal of Trident should be scrutinised to ensure value for money. Lib-Dems will continue to make the case for alternatives."* An example of where opt out applies.

A full and final Coalition Agreement will be published shortly. What we have so far is the initial operating plan. In some cases the detail is quite sparse, just three lines on immigration for instance, in other cases such as the plans for deficit reduction and the environment, the details are more extensive. For those with an interest in education, things are a bit at the sparse end. There is precious little for instance on FE and skills, just a few guiding principles for school reform and a bit of 'wait and see' for HE in light of the fees review.

By all accounts there was a fair bit of discussion about education as the coalition terms were being put together, much of it about the pupil premium. This was pledged in all three Party Manifestos but it was the Lib-Dems who pushed for it hardest and it was the Lib-Dem model that earned the blessing from the Institute of Fiscal Studies. Much of the funding in education already applies a deprivation factor but the Lib-Dem model is targeted directly at providing a *'a fair start in life'* and has the added advantage of coming with considerable flexibility in how it can be used; *"the extra money could be used to cut class sizes, attract the best teachers, offer extra one-to-one tuition and provide for after-school and holiday support."* It was costed by the Lib-Dems at £2.5bn and the coalition commits to fund it but note, *"from outside the schools budget by reductions in spending elsewhere."* This suggests it will form part of the budget negotiations.

As for schools, a bit like the League of Nations, we now have three guiding principles for future development. One is non-contentious in that it promises all schools *"greater freedom over the curriculum."* Both Parties made a big play for this in the election campaign but presumably this *'freedom'* will be outside the core curriculum. Michael Gove has already made improving performance in English and maths a key priority and will surely want to retain oversight in this area. It will be interesting therefore to see just how such freedom is exercised and whether it's used an incentive or a right. Being able to offer iGCSEs is certainly a freedom state schools may welcome but it shouldn't stop there.

The other two principles have provoked more discussion. One is the principle that *"all schools are held properly accountable."* There will be considerable interest

here in seeing what happens to two contentious mechanisms that have been used for school accountability in the past, namely league tables and SATs. On SATs, the two parties agreed in their Manifestos on the need for testing at Key Stage 2 but disagreed on the approach, the Conservatives talked about "*rigour*," presumably meaning external testing while the Lib-Dems talked about more teacher assessment. It may well be that external testing is retained but the accountability aspect played down as, to move to the second point, league tables are reviewed. With the School Report Card now presumably out of the picture, both Parties will be keen to tap into the wider and speedier sources of performance data that were not available when the current system was constructed. Current thinking has schools held to account through national reporting on core subjects with other achievements recorded perhaps in different forms of profile devised by the school but this may be the subject of review.

On the third principle "*that new providers can enter the state school system in response to parental demand*," the inclination is clearly towards the Conservative wish to open up the state school system to other providers. Whether this goes as far as a new breed of Swedish models is hard to tell at present, costs alone may temper the ambition. But even if the initial push is towards extending the academy template as far and as wide as possible, this will be interesting, as the Lib-Dems came out against this in their Manifesto arguing for more locally managed schools instead. It seems that Michael Gove will at least initially have a fairly free rein on school reform, it's a core part of the Conservative Party's 'radical reform' agenda so we await the forthcoming Schools Bill with interest.

On FE, as indicated, the agreement is virtually silent. This may not be a bad thing if FE, which has faced a swirl of change over recent years, is left alone for a while to get on with things. One area of the FE sector's work is however captured in the agreement and that is training and work programmes for the unemployed.

Assiduous followers of Conservative policy will have already spotted vast chunks of last year's Conference Paper '*Get Britain Working*,' lifted into the Party Manifesto and the bare bones of this workfare programme appear in the coalition agreement as well. "*The Parties agree to end all existing welfare to work programmes and to create a single welfare to work programme to help all unemployed people get back into work.*" Sharp eyed providers will also note two other accompanying points. First that provider contracts will "*reflect more closely the results they achieve in getting people back into work*," so payment by results, and second that "*the funding mechanism used to finance welfare to work programmes should be reformed to reflect the fact that initial investment delivers later savings in lower benefit expenditure*" so investment will taper down.

As for HE, there's nothing yet on the vision of HE going forward, the nature and quality of degree programmes or even HE's engagement with the economy, each of which have been under discussion in recent months. The reason is that everyone is waiting for the outcomes of the fees review, some perhaps more eagerly than others. The agreement sets out the criteria that the coalition will use in judging what the review eventually recommends but with the Lib-Dems campaigning in the election for the abolition of tuition fees, this could be an interesting test for the coalition. The agreement provides for the Lib-Dems to be able to abstain in any subsequent vote. It will be interesting to see how often that right is exercised.

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