



2010/19

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'Now the hard work begins.' Nick Clegg's message at the launch of the government's action plan reminds us that the new era has well and truly begun. 31 policies in as many pages, the *'programme for government'* published this week builds on the working agreement released ten days ago and sets out the plan of action in each policy area from banking to universities. As David Cameron remarked, *"even if you've read a hundred Party Manifestos, you've never read a document like this one."*

It is in many ways an historic document, a careful blend of different ideals welded together in the pursuit of political reform, economic growth and social responsibility and all symbolised in three key words: freedom, fairness and responsibility. When the going gets tough as it inevitably will, these three words will provide the spiritual touchstone to which the coalition can always return to find its inner strength.

In drawing up their policy programme the coalition government has not been short of advice. When it comes to education, plenty of groups have been chipping in. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) for instance welcomed Michael Gove with a ten item wish list. The very first one, *"pass fewer education laws,"* may be breached next week if as anticipated a new Schools Bill is included in the forthcoming Queen's Speech. Other items range from the generic, *"the next generation should not have their education jeopardised as a result of an economic crisis not of their making"* to the specific, *"strengthen post-14 qualifications by introducing a general diploma with a broad core of knowledge and skills."* These and items on accountability, assessment and partnership will surely be somewhere in the new Secretary of State's in-tray as he sets out his priorities for the coming year reflecting perhaps on whether the final sentence in the letter is a blessing or a curse: *'may your tenure as secretary of state be longer, more effective and less interventionist than those of your predecessors.'*

The FE sector had its say through the columns of the Times Ed a couple of weeks ago. *'Work with us, value what the sector can bring, simplify things and let us get on with it'* were the messages coming through here. The unsung FE sector remains the place where learning and skill aspirations for all ages are realised and it will want to see early confirmation from the government that in the words of the initial agreement, the sector will be set free and funding and accountability systems simplified. Funding flexibility will be the main priority here.

As for employers, the latest CBI *'Education and Skills Survey'* released this week reminds us that their wish list for education hasn't changed significantly over the years. *"Employers want a greater focus on intermediate and higher level skills, along with a drive to strip out levels of bureaucracy,"* wrote the Director-General in his Foreword to the Survey. As for specifics, over 70% of employers in the survey wanted *"action"* to improve the employability of school leavers, over 63% wanted *"action"* to raise standards of literacy and numeracy, 46% wanted education standards raised generally while 42% wanted more *"high quality vocational options"* available. A reminder perhaps to the new government that employers remain to be convinced.

So just what's in this policy programme for the world of education?

For families and children, the headline message is that the coalition will keep Sure Start but *"take it back to its original purpose."* The aim is for a simpler, more efficient system, a phrase that we will no doubt have to get used to along with *"investigate ways of ensuring that providers are paid in part by the results they achieve,"* which

also applies here. Essentially the aim is for earlier and more targeted intervention with increased numbers of Sure Start visitors paid for by 'refocusing' existing services and by raiding the Health budget.

For schools there are six headline messages. Few will perhaps come as a surprise to those in the sector but it's been interesting to see what has survived given some of the differences on education policy between the two Parties prior to the election. First, as indicated in the initial agreement, the Lib-Dem proposal for the pupil premium remains although the money will have to be found potentially from *"reductions in spending elsewhere."* Second, the Conservative commitment to opening out the school system to allow for parents and others to be involved in setting up state schools also remains. The make-up of the new Dept suggests that this will be very much a flagship policy for the new government. And while on school structures, the programme also provides for the creation of new Technical Academies with two due to open next year. These new forms of Academy constitute part of the new government's attempts to beef up technical and vocational education where much of the drive for this will come from the other Dept, that for Business, Innovation and Skills. David Willetts' first major speech as Minister in that Dept will also interest many. It was unequivocal in its support for the importance of vocational learning; *"I am a believer in rigour and excellence vocational qualifications just as much as in academic ones."* No agnosticism here.

Third, on SATs, the coalition has gone for the option of a further review. For many people this area has been awash with reviews recently, the Select Committee Inquiry and the Expert Group Report to name but two. The announcement of another one is partly a reflection that this is an area where consensus has proved difficult to achieve and partly a reflection of the fact that national testing impacts on so many other things like teaching and learning, school accountability and international standing; a review allows more time to bring these strands together. Fourth, league tables will be reformed. Not a great deal of additional detail yet but initial steers have been towards more sophisticated forms of data with a greater focus on core subjects. Fifth, teachers, high up the list of priorities for both Parties and where the proposals may prove a mixed blessing for the profession with more back-up in the classroom but greater flexibility over pay and performance systems. Sixth, and finally, the heavy hand will be removed as far as possible as schools are promised *"greater freedom over the curriculum."*

For post-16s and FE, three points stand out. First a number of pledges under the Big Society tent including voluntary activity and in particular the National Citizen Service for 16 year olds due to be introduced from next year. Second the intention to offer more apprenticeship, college and workplace training places, no specific numbers here as in the Manifestos but a top priority all the same. And third, and perhaps most significant for the sector, the promise of greater freedom although this will probably come with subsequent strings about responsiveness and efficiency. As for HE, as intimated in the earlier working agreement, the action plan sets out the procedure for dealing with the report into HE funding when it comes out in a few months time.

With that now sorted, all eyes now turn to the forthcoming economic announcements.

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