

POLICY WATCH

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So how might the Conservatives 'do' education?

As they seek to present themselves as a Government in waiting, the Conservatives face a difficult question. How on earth do you come up with radical new policies in an area like education when the public finances are in such a state?

Comparisons are being made with 1979 when Mrs Thatcher won her first general election. Her winning Manifesto then was typically short and to the point. Education, which was not the high profile policy area that it is today, featured only fleetingly. It was included briefly in the list of five headline tasks identified for urgent action at the start of the Manifesto and earned a short paragraph later on under the heading '*Standards in education*' but that was about it. There were some vague promises to raise standards, improve basic skills and support excellence in HE but not much else. As an incoming Prime Minister, with little money in the coffers, Mrs Thatcher was careful not to make rash promises that she knew the country couldn't afford. "*We make no lavish promises. Many things will simply have to wait until the economy has been revived and we are once again creating the wealth on which so much else depends.*" Such sentiments highlight why many see a similar scenario facing David Cameron 30 years on.

He has been equally cautious about making rash policy pronouncements. "*We won't arrive in government with a whole bunch of unaffordable commitments*" he declared recently. Having said that, the Conservatives may not have many actual policy commitments yet. Developing policy in Opposition can be a cat and mouse affair, toy with ideas slowly and wait for the right moment to pounce.

Like both Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, David Cameron has, however, declared a passion for education. "*It is a complete passion of mine and something that is a huge priority for an incoming Conservative Government to get right*" he told The Daily Telegraph in February. He has also indicated that his first Queen's Speech would include an Education Bill on school standards while that Swedish school model has been mentioned so many times in Conservative speeches over recent months, that it'll surely feature somewhere in an early reform Paper. But beyond that, how much do we know about what the Conservatives would do about education and perhaps just as importantly, how they would pay for it?

To take the paying for it first, recent speeches have given us some inkling although in all fairness it's difficult for an Opposition to cost everything until they have got their hands on the Treasury books. We know that the Conservatives are likely to stick to the current model of 3 year spending cycles rather than the annual spending rounds adopted by Mrs Thatcher. We also know that the Conservatives plan to undertake serious reform of public service, including education. This was identified in a [Change Paper](#) in January which condemned Labour's failure to reform public services as "*the great missed opportunity of this Labour government.*" We also know that the axiom of such public service reform will be



'more for less.' As the Paper put it, *"radical plans to reform public services that will deliver better results for less money."*

We also know from David Cameron's speech at the Party's recent Spring Conference that effecting such reforms will require significant changes in the way in which state services are provided. He outlined four.

First, tighter control over public spending; *"we've made it clear that a Conservative Government would spend less than Labour."* So cutting back on bureaucracy, waste, duplicating quangos and non-essential support; often easier to accuse than remove but all likely to be in the firing line. Second, being much more careful with public money. *"Our education departments employ 4,000 people and Britain is ranked 17th in the world league tables for maths. Sweden is at number ten and their education dept employs just 300 people."* The comparison is not exact but the message is clear: do more with less. Third, sorting out the root of the problem rather than treating the surface. *"So our plans for school reform, welfare reform and strengthening families, which might once have been seen as just socially desirable, in this age of austerity become economically essential."* That suggests fewer Government strategies, more value for money projects. And fourth, more transparent and devolved services; the familiar race to hand more power to the people. *"So in education, we'll end the state monopoly and allow new schools to be set up, giving parents real school choice for the first time."*

As for education policy, we do at least have two Green 'initial' Policy Papers, one on schools and one on FE and Skills although these have been on the table for some time and are a bit dusty now; the schools one, for instance, came out in autumn 2007 and the FE/Skills one last summer. For updates we have to rely on snippets in speeches and to the media.

Michael Gove's speech on schools to the Party's Spring Conference in April is a case in point. It's strong on traditional values, spreading the academy 'success' model and granting schools greater freedom in return for higher standards. Five actions were outlined *"that could be taken on day one of a Conservative Government."*

First, change the law to give teachers greater disciplining powers; second, ensure that every school was setting and streaming pupils and tailoring teaching to need; third, create an independent body to ensure school tests were amongst *'the most rigorous in the world;'* fourth, reform literacy and numeracy so that no child left school illiterate; fifth, restore prestige to the teaching profession, with hints about the need for better training and support.

Three messages from this and other speeches stand out: interest in creating a new exams and testing regulator; more freedom in return for sharper outcomes for schools; the active engagement of parents. Little on Diplomas despite recent Questions in Parliament; a review, some simplifications and possibly a different pre and post-16 version seem to loom, probably in that order but continuing commitment to vocational learning in some form.

For FE and Skills, the messages are slightly less nebulous: strong support for apprenticeships; a universal careers service; a separate funding model for FE; a strong role for employer bodies but a simpler landscape; sharper outcomes and quality but essentially a skills driven service. Expect activity to crank up noticeably.

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