

Policy watch

The government looks to education to help break the glass ceiling



Bit by bit the battle lines for the general election are taking shape.

The government has reportedly been developing its campaign plan around five key pledges including: job and training guarantees; more responsive health care; stronger personal care particularly for the elderly; a crack down on anti-social behaviour; and clear measures to tackle the national deficit. The Lib-Dems have identified "four (fair) objectives" that are likely to form the core of their proposals including: a fairer tax system; a fair start for children, with smaller class sizes and one-to-one tuition; a fair economy in respect of job creation and breaking up the banking system; and fairer local politics with, for example, more power for local communities. As for the Conservatives, they too have been carefully building their case with a series of draft manifesto pledges on the NHS, families and schools, all within the context of transforming public services and ultimately to be directed by a new Public Services Accountability Advisory Board.

Yet there is one issue that has been gnawing away at politicians from all sides for some time and if the series of Reports that has come out recently is anything to go by will feature heavily not just in the election but in education in trays as well. The issue is social mobility; it may appear in other guises like class and social inequality but essentially it's about the provision of opportunity in society and, and here's the issue for education, the extent to which talent and skill is developed so that all can access such opportunity. John Major may have declared the existence of the classless society and the Blair and Brown governments may have made social equality a key plank in many of their reforms but according to a hefty Report from the National Equality Panel this week, the gap between the rich and the poor in the UK is wider now than at any point since the Second World War and, uncomfortably for the government, has recently got worse not better. The Prime Minister called the Report "sobering" and particularly so as it followed the Save the Children Report a few days earlier which had headlined the fact that the number of children living in severe poverty had "shot up to 1.7m" in this, one of the richest countries in the world.

At the moment, the government is keen to use the Equality Bill which is currently wending its way through Parliament to place a duty on Local Authorities and public bodies to tackle the issue of social inequality. The Opposition is not convinced and believes that rather than adding 'Harriet's law' to the list of burdens placed on employers, more should be done through the education system to correct social imbalances.

It's a point Michael Gove has been making for some time particularly since his 2008 'A Failed Generation' Paper claimed that the gap between best and worst in terms of education achievement was getting worse. The cudgels were taken up again this week by the Shadow Schools Minister in a question in Parliament. "Is the Minister not concerned," he asked, "that nearly half of the 75,000 children on free school meals do not get a single GCSE above a grade D; that fewer than 4% of those children are even entered for a GCSE in biology, physics or chemistry; that the

independent sector now accounts for nearly half of all A grades in GCSE French and achieves more A grades at A level than all our comprehensive schools put together; and most damning of all that the achievement gap in GCSEs between the poorest areas in the country and the richest is widening from 20 percentage points last year to a staggering 25 this year?"* There were some disturbing figures in here and the Minister was of course concerned but this is an issue that faces all parties.

For its part, the government can reasonably claim that things are improving. As the Prime Minister wrote on the Number 10 website this week, *" we are driving upward mobility with a children's centre in every community; a guarantee that every child will have mastered the 3Rs by the end of primary school; a personal tutor for all secondary school pupils; and raising the education and training leaving age to 18 with Education Maintenance Allowances to support staying on."* On top of that, in a further Report out in what has clearly been a busy week on social mobility, HEFCE reported that the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds now participating in higher education has *" risen by around 30% over the last five years and by over 50% over the past 15 years."* Young people from advantaged areas are still more likely to enter higher ed but this at least provides some vindication that government policies in this area can have an effect.

Further proof of how seriously the government is taking the issue of social mobility can be seen in its recent response to another important Report, this time the Panel Report on Fair Access to the Professions.

This Report, as the title on the lid implies, looked at access to the professions, a key element in social mobility. In all, the Panel, chaired by former Cabinet Minister Alan Milburn last year, came up with a huge shopping list of 88 recommendations, the majority of which lay at the door of one or other of the two education depts. Last week, the government issued its official response, accepting either fully or in principle all recommendations bar seven. Amongst the seven were proposals to dismantle the careers service, extend the right to flexible working to all and to implement a system of levers such as tax incentives to encourage employers to open up access. None were deemed appropriate at this moment in time.

A number of other recommendations were accepted in principle only, recommendations such as putting funds in to help state schools set up Cadet Forces, to set up a 'professionals.com' website and for each profession to develop partnership compact arrangements with university depts. Each of these will require a bit more time and in most cases a bit more money.

But the government will push ahead with a number of other measures that may yet have an impact on social mobility. These include: revamping the Gifted and Talented programme in schools; introducing a national mentoring scheme for youngsters in Years 9 to 13; opening up entry points for HE; building employability into more HE courses; developing an online National Internship Service for undergraduates; and perhaps most notably of all setting up a Social Mobility Commission within the Cabinet Office to monitor and report on developments and trends.

As the Minister said when issuing the response, *" we have raised the glass ceiling of social mobility in this country, now we must break it."* Many people will be waiting for the sound of breaking glass.

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