

## Policy watch

If the Lib-Dems hold the balance after an election what education policies might they pursue?



Might the [Lib-Dems](#) have a crucial role to play after the next general election and if so, how much do we know about their policies particularly in such a critical area as education?

It's 36 years since the electorate last failed to deliver a majority verdict in a general election and stories are rife that a similar scenario is building this time. In the February 1974 election, Ted Heath actually won the popular vote, albeit marginally but failed to win enough seats to gain a majority in Parliament. He embarked on a frenetic few days of bargaining with amongst others the Ulster Unionists and the then leader of the Liberal Party, Jeremy Thorpe, but when this failed, had to admit defeat. Harold Wilson was duly asked to form a Labour government which he did, calling and winning a second general election in October of the same year. Labour's parliamentary majority remained slim all the way through to May 1979 when the Conservatives regained power under Margaret Thatcher. It was a fairly turbulent time in British politics and reached its nadir in the infamous 1978 'winter of discontent' when much of the country was on strike.

He may not face precisely the same conditions all these years later but to win the 2010 general election, David Cameron has to secure a swing greater than that achieved by Margaret Thatcher in 1979. It's a big ask which is why people are talking about the possibility of a hung Parliament. A poll of pollsters last month found few of them willing to predict a large majority for the Conservatives, most saw it as a Conservative victory but only just. Under such conditions, other Parties like the Lib-Dems will look for opportunities to press the claims for some of their own policies.

So what do we know about the [Lib-Dems](#) and where they stand on things?

We know that whatever happened in the past, the Lib-Dems don't seem to be up for deals this time. Nick Clegg was clear about this in an article in the Times last month: *"My message to Mr Brown and Mr Cameron is simple; the Liberal Democrats are up for real change but we are not up for sale."*

They may not be up for sale but they will be up for negotiating support for some of their key policies. There are four in particular, which according to Nick Clegg the Party *"will unwaveringly pursue."* Built on the theme of 'fairness for all,' they include firstly, 'a fair start for all our children,' so smaller classes with more personal tuition and particularly the introduction of a pupil premium. Secondly, a fair tax system that includes taxing income and capital at the same rate and phasing out special pension subsidies for the highest-earners, with the money being used to take more of the poorest people out of the tax system. Thirdly, a fair and sustainable economy, by changing the centralised banking system, encouraging more social housing and creating more jobs particularly within the green economy. And fourthly, a fairer political system with reform of the voting system and the House of Lords, more power to local government and more accountability of MPs.

As to the policy details, much of this has been developed and discussed at various Party Conferences over the last year and conveniently brought together into a pocket guide. For the world of education, the main headline measures would seem to include the following.

For schools, apart from the £2.5m pupil premium and the '*fair start for every child*,' policies come under three main headings.

Firstly, transforming the curriculum by slimming down the National Curriculum, "*it's too rigid and fails to motivate and encourage*," and replacing it with "*a more flexible Minimum Curriculum Entitlement offering greater choice and room for innovation*." On the two current pressure points in the curriculum, namely teaching to the test and 14-19 Diplomas, for the former the Lib-Dems want to shift the emphasis away from summative to formative testing and assessment and for the latter go for a General Diploma using existing building blocks such as GCSEs and BTECs very much as Tomlinson and the ASCL have argued.

Secondly, for teachers, they would want to strengthen teacher training with more on the job training and a more formal programme of professional development for existing teachers. On pay, they support the principle of a national pay structure but want to see schools with greater freedom to attract and reward the best teachers "*particularly in shortage subjects*."

Thirdly, on school structures, the Lib-Dems favour a model of Sponsor Managed Schools. These are schools that "*would be commissioned by local authorities, allow educational charities and private providers to be involved and end the lack of a level playing field on issues such as funding*." Like the Conservatives, the Lib-Dems appear keen to free up schools and teachers and encourage the creative juices to flow and indeed much of the language appears similar but that hasn't stopped the Party from criticising Conservative 'free' school proposals, David Laws describing them as "*deeply flawed both in terms of money and on the curriculum*."

For adult learning and skills, like the other Parties the Lib-Dems are keen to expand apprenticeship numbers and to help more people progress on to higher education through a vocational route where for example they've promised to fund an additional 50,000 places on foundation degrees. They also want to "*re-focus Train to Gain*," in effect target the money more effectively at those most in need rather than offer blanket subsidies.

But in at least two areas, [Lib-Dem](#) policy is quite distinctive. One is in support for young people, that's 16-24 year olds, where the Party is offering a 90 day promise of help and financial support "*to access training, education, work experience or specialist professional help*" for any young person who has been unemployed for three months. This contrasts with promises from the main Parties of help after six months. Also, to help poorer families, a promise of £55 a week for three months to pay young people on an internship or work experience. Under current conditions, young people cannot claim both an allowance and undertake an internship at the same time. As a result a number of disadvantaged families, not wishing to lose benefits, miss out.

The other area in which Lib-Dem policy is distinctive is that of HE tuition fees where the Party has been committed to the principle of scrapping tuition fees for first degrees but where reality may yet intrude.

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