

**David Laws MP, Address to the Association of
Teachers and Lecturers, 29th March 2010.**

Opening Comments.....

Thank you for the invitation to be with you today, at this “interesting” time, to set out the Liberal Democrat vision for England’s education system.

When I look at your own blueprint for change I see that although we do not share precisely the same policy prescriptions, our objectives and our concerns about the existing education system are remarkably similar.

*We both want to reduce the extent of bureaucracy and politically driven micro-management.

*We both want to set schools free and to challenge the dependency culture that there has sometimes been in our schools system.

*We both understand that with additional freedoms comes the need for a rigorous accountability framework, but one which needs to be “intelligent”, and not based on either crude measures of performance, or for that matter on a “prizes for all” mentality.

So, without I hope being excessively partisan or tribal, I want to use the next 20 minutes or so to set out my party's vision on education.

Where appropriate, I will spell out how I see our vision differing from that of the other two main parties.

I then very much look forward to answering any questions which you may have for me.

English Education in 2010 – Where are we now?

Our obvious starting point has to be a brief assessment of where we are now.

The Government will tell you, of course, that we are doing extraordinarily well – that standards have never been higher.

In stark contrast, Michael Gove and the Conservatives, argue that standards are slipping, that published results are misleading, and that we are “dumbing down”.

I believe that neither of these extremes is a fair or accurate assessment of the state of English education.

Without an accurate diagnosis of where we actually are, we cannot expect to take the right medicine.

We believe that there have been some real achievements over the last decade, but also that there are some genuine causes for concern.

Of the achievements I would suggest that:

***We have almost certainly seen an improvement in standards, which has in some schools and some parts of the country been dramatic.

***We have in England some superb schools of all types – private, community, specialist, academies, selective and non selective. Our top performing schools and pupils are some of the best in the world.

***There has been as big investment in the capital and equipment stock.

***And teacher salaries, numbers and recruitment are all improving.

But although there are some great achievements, there are also some **big challenges, and one or two dark clouds.**

In particular:

***Around half of students fail to reach the benchmark 5 good GCSE level, with English and Maths. This surely cannot be acceptable. After some 12 years of compulsory education, a much greater proportion of children should be reaching these standards.

***There is a huge gap between the outturns for advantaged and disadvantaged young people. Indeed, there is a huge gap between the outturns for similarly disadvantaged pupils in different parts of the country.

***There is real confusion and uncertainty over what is happening to exam results and standards. There is a genuine concern that the apparent improvement in results is not real, and that it reflects teaching to the test, dumbing down of exams, or switching to “easier” subjects to inflate results.

***We have Government determined targets which risk distorting educational priorities, and undermining the mantra that “every child matters”. I am particularly concerned about undue focus on the C/D grade borderline; pressure to choose exams which deliver league table position; and too much emphasis on passing exams rather than real learning.

***Excessive and destabilising political interference in schools in terms of what is taught and how it is taught.

***The leadership and performance in too many schools is poor or only satisfactory, while we still rely on crude and often counter-productive mechanisms for measuring school performance and for holding schools to account.

***And, of course, there is now the risk that we are entering a new “dark age” of education funding where some of the big gains of the last 10 years could so easily be lost.

My conclusion is that English education is an average performer in relation to our peer group of similar countries, with some very impressive performances at the “top” of the ability spectrum, and a long tail of underperformance, which is linked to the UK’s very high levels of child poverty and the unstable home environments in which too many of our children grow up.

Liberal Democrat Priorities.

I could now produce a very long list of Liberal Democrat policies designed to address the challenges set out above.

But, in the light of our time constraints, I want to focus on just 3 key areas.

I also want to say in the context of the General Election that the error that Governments – perhaps particularly new Governments – tend to make is to legislate both in haste and in excessive volume.

We are already into our 12th Education Act of the current Parliament.

The latest Bill that we are debating amends an Act which was passed into law by Parliament just one week before the current Bill was published.

Governments, particularly new Governments, need to think carefully before they act.

They – we – need to get the big strategic decisions right and we then have to avoid the temptation to keep micro-managing and meddling.

That brings me to my first point.

1.) Education Freedom Act.

My Party wants to see a new relationship between central government, local government, schools and colleges, and educational agencies.

We believe that the current degree of Central Government micro-management and interference is both unnecessary and deeply damaging.

We believe that it has reduced faith in educational standards; helped distort judgements about delivering appropriate education; suffocated innovation and led to destabilising and costly changes in policy.

Both other parties frequently use the language of smaller government and greater educational freedom.

But both other parties are – in my view – instinctive centralisers.

Labour has since 1997 been addicted to central control of Education. Ed Balls' latest education bill brings in new and excessive levels of bureaucracy.

Too often even the Conservatives seem only to want to replace one set of central diktats with another.

As Nick Gibb once explained for the Tories to a Conference of head teachers: “As education minister I would be negligent if I knew what worked but failed to impose this on every school in the country.”

Liberal Democrats do not believe that politicians are endowed with such universal wisdom.

We believe that the people close to the services themselves – including head teachers and parents – can best drive change.

So we want to decentralise power, and reduce the extent of destabilising political interference in education.

What would this mean in practice?

Firstly, a radical reduction in the size and responsibilities of the central department in Westminster and elsewhere.

Secondly, a new and fully independent Educational Standards Authority, replacing OFQUAL AND QCDA, and with responsibility for an OFSTED which would once again be focused on its core responsibility – educational standards.

Thirdly, and I will return later to this, a strategic role for local authorities, not in micro-managing or meddling in individual schools, but in providing local oversight of performance and support to those schools which need it.

But we are proposing not merely to shift power between different levels of government but to pass much more power and freedom down to schools and colleges themselves.

The prescriptive National Curriculum would be replaced by a streamlined Minimum Curriculum Entitlement.

We would reform the rigid pay and conditions rules.

All schools would be given the powers to innovate currently enjoyed by only the few.

And we would end the national initiatives which presume that there is only one “right” way to deliver education – and that the man in Whitehall really does know best.

We want to learn from variety, innovation and experimentation.

We do not believe that the Whitehall screwdriver should reach down into every classroom, as it currently does.

2.) **Funding: Closing the Gap.**

The second issue that I want to talk about today is funding, particularly in the context of closing the performance gap between disadvantaged young people and the rest.

Money is far from being the only key ingredient in delivering improved education. But it is incredibly important.

Smaller class sizes; more one to one tuition; high quality staff; good buildings; books and equipment: all these things require money.

Money matters.

As many of you will recall, when necessary, my Party was even willing to call for 1 penny more on income tax to deliver better funding for education.

Now all of us know that we are entering a very much tougher environment for public spending.

Labour is promising that it will protect the existing schools budget from cuts – but with little growth of funding.

Worryingly, the Conservatives are not making education one of the priority areas, and are presumably therefore looking to cut budgets.

My Party has also had to look very closely over the last few months at its public spending commitments.

We have had to drop some proposals and downgrade others to longer term aspirations.

But both Nick Clegg and I are very passionate about education being a priority, and about ensuring that every single person in Britain can reach his or her potential.

We regard investing in education as the single most important investment that we can make. And we regard the inequality of opportunity in Britain today as our single greatest long term domestic challenge.

That is why I can tell you today that we have decided to maintain our commitment to introducing a Pupil Premium, which would deliver an additional £2.5bn each year into the schools budget, over and above existing plans.

This will be the largest spending commitment which we will make in our Manifesto – highlighting our commitment to better education.

That means that we will be the only Party at the forthcoming General Election arguing for additional funding for schools.

All of this money will be found by taking tough decisions to re-allocate money from other Government budgets, including by withdrawing means-tested tax credits from those on higher earnings.

Our Pupil Premium would mean more money for almost every school in the country. It would help raise the funding of the most disadvantaged pupils to the levels in the private sector.

It would help the schools with disadvantaged pupils to close the huge performance gap which we currently experience.

It would also deal with the serious injustices within our existing school funding system, which means that schools with similar levels of challenge and disadvantage can have budgets which differ in size by up to £500,000 each year.

This will particularly help many of the areas – including rural areas – where funding is much lower than it should be and where the performance of children from low income backgrounds is now much worse than it is in areas such as inner London, where large gains have been made over the last decade.

We believe that allocating additional money in this way will ensure that scarce cash is used where it can make the biggest difference – helping those children who are furthest behind.

And we will use whatever influence we do have in the next Parliament to seek to turn this vision into a reality.

Improving School Performance: Reform and Intelligent Accountability.

The final big issue which I want to touch on is how we improve school performance through better leadership, governance and innovation.

We know that a strong head teacher, good governance, a high quality staff, firm discipline and high aspirations are the most important factors in delivering excellent education.

The key is how to promote these characteristics in 23,500 schools.

Liberal Democrats do not believe that this can be done by central government micro-management and direction – which is this Government's favoured approach.

Ed Balls is that man in the Ministry who thinks he knows best.

Michael Gove, on the other hand, has proposed that school improvement can be delivered by creating an educational market-place and by allowing new providers to open up schools.

As a liberal, I am fundamentally supportive of choice, and I do not believe that the state has a monopoly of wisdom over how to establish or run schools.

Liberal Democrats would therefore also welcome suitably qualified new providers to the running of state funded schools.

We have called our model of how this should work: “Sponsor Managed Schools”.

We hope that these new providers will help deliver good leadership, stronger governance, more innovation, and in many areas more choice.

But there is a risk that what is being claimed by the Tories for their model is being vastly over-sold, and will fail to deliver higher standards.

It is not only that there is a limit to the number of new providers, based on competence, and costs of entry, which will mean that most of our 23,500 schools will continue for the future with the same governance arrangements as now.

It is also that Sponsor Managed or Academy status is not a magic wand. It does not guarantee success.

Some of these schools will fail. And there must be mechanisms to hold these schools to account.

In Michael Gove’s model, that is the education market. But we are not talking about petrol stations or sweet-shops, we are talking about schools, and more importantly – children.

Sometimes, particularly in rural areas, there will be no effective choice for most pupils.

And, because children get only one chance in life, we cannot rely on the sometimes sclerotic mechanism of choice to drive up performance in failing schools.

An Academy without any effective oversight could fail for a long period without some external support and challenge – and that cannot simply mean an infrequent visit by OFSTED.

That is why in our model there is a real role for both local authorities and the Educational Standards Authority in holding schools to account and helping to broker support.

This does **not** mean allowing local authorities to meddle with school freedoms, nor does it mean local authorities adopting their old role as cheerleaders for “their” schools.

Local authorities need to be able to exercise real oversight and hold to account failing state funded schools.

And they themselves should be accountable to the Educational Standards Authority for how they perform this task.

We cannot rely on the old mechanism of local elections to hold local authorities to account – in one party, rotten, boroughs this mechanism has failed too many generations of children.

And to hold schools to account and support them, we need to sweep away much of the existing complex, overlapping, systems of accountability and support and create a more streamlined model.

We need new ways of measuring school performance – including some form of a report card that genuinely allows us to compare schools and colleges which face different challenges.

We also need to replace targets which distort, such as the present 5 A*-C targets, with more intelligent accountability which gives incentives to stretch all pupils.

And the exams that go into these targets must be realistic in their comparability.

We do not, however, support Michael Gove's proposal to drop vocational subjects from all league tables. That, in our view, would merely replace one undesirable incentive with another, and set back even more the prospect of offering students serious vocational options.

Conclusions.

There is much still to do to give every child the chance that he or she deserves.

A new Government needs to think before acting, and get the “big things” right, rather than creating a permanent process of change and instability.

In my view, both the Conservatives and Labour are addicted to a top-down, Westminster-driven, education system.

The Liberal Democrats are committed to reducing political meddling and devolving power and freedoms.

On funding, the Government is committed to a near freeze in budgets, and the Conservatives to cuts.

The Liberal Democrats are making education our number one spending commitment, and are committed to a Pupil Premium with **new** money – which is the only way such a policy could ever be delivered.

On improving school performance, the Government believes in the top down approach of the National Challenge.

The Conservatives have a naïve view that the market alone will deliver.

Liberal Democrats believe in innovation and choice, but we do not believe that all schools will reach their potential without local challenge and local support.

I am, once again, grateful for this opportunity.

I am happy to take any of your questions...

ENDS.