

The election 2015

What do the parties have in store?

It's the tightest general election in decades, but under which party will UK education be better off? **Sue Hackman** reviews the emergent schools policies among the biggest parties.

The general election is drawing near, and it's looking like the tightest election in decades. Some polls are even suggesting a dead heat, with Labour and Conservatives ending up with the same number of seats.

Whoever gets in, there will be less money for education. Conservatives have already admitted to a freeze on school budgets which means that new money will not go as far when prices rise. Liberal Democrats have promised to protect all sectors of education, whereas Conservatives make their promise only to schools. Labour, too, have promised protection for education budgets 'from cradle to college'.

In truth, none of the parties can promise significant new money, just new priorities. Assume no increases, and anticipate an erosion in buying power.

A Conservative future

Under the Conservatives, the push to academise schools will continue and extend deeper into the primary sector. More free schools will be created. Tough new targets combined with a hike in the floor standard will bring more schools into the

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gravitational field of DfE academisation. Indeed, one of the unspoken features of Conservative policy will be the growth of the DfE's hands-on influence, as it becomes a sort of super-LA with a growing number of advisers and commissioners.

One of the earliest policies to be publicised was the replacement of headteachers in schools found by Ofsted to require improvement and are unable to turn around quickly. The main challenge will be finding willing candidates to fill the posts. On the same day, Conservatives mooted a 'basics' test in schools that were struggling below a 'good' judgement, but this has not been mentioned again during the campaign. Nicky Morgan also set a new target to put England in the top five countries in international tests of literacy and

numeracy by 2020. Some will think this a reckless target, and others will call it brave, but few think it a bad thing.

Conservatives plan to introduce a new test in Year 7 for pupils who do not meet expectations in Year 6. It's not the first time this has happened. A Labour government once put new jackets on the Year 6 tests and issued them to underperforming pupils in Year 7 as a re-sit facility. Secondary teachers did not object in principle, but they found it hard to prepare pupils for a test that did not sit well with their current curriculum. That, plus the infamous summer dip in performance, produced a crop of rather dull results.

There is a rumour that the Pupil Premium will disappear under Conservatives, but they haven't said that. The Pupil Premium was the love child of the

Liberal Democrats and without them, it is possible that a Conservative government will give it up. In truth, the premium will have to change as the benefits system is reorganised. Different pupils will become eligible and ineligible as parental income becomes the new qualifying condition.

A Labour future

Labour promises to re-strengthen local authorities by making schools accountable to local directors of school standards. One might be forgiven for thinking that LAs already have people in this sort of role, though diminishing resources and academisation limit their scope for action. Academies would be retained under Labour, but free schools would be abolished and reabsorbed into the LA.

Labour is offering to expand free early education to 25 hours for three and four-year-olds and guarantee wraparound care for primary pupils between 8am and 6pm. There will be reinvestment in Sure Start. That will pose an organisational challenge for some schools.

As expected, Labour say they will restore the status of vocational subjects in secondary by introducing a Technical Baccalaureate (which people are already calling the Tech Bacc) to sit alongside the academic EBacc. All young people will be required to study English and Maths until they are 18.

Under Labour, teaching would be restricted to qualified teachers only. Earlier plans to introduce periodic revalidation have been dropped from the manifesto itself, though this doesn't mean they won't do it. High quality in-service training and new career paths are mentioned, but not how they will be bestowed.

Tantalisingly, Tristram Hunt has described the current system as overladen with testing, and he has hinted at a stripping-back if he becomes Education Secretary.

A hung parliament could be interesting...

A number of coalitions look possible at the time of writing – coalitions between different parties and coalitions with different operating principles, ranging from full programmes to occasional alliances. Coalitions tend to work slowly, creak with tension and sometimes produce policy that is only half coherent, but they are also conducive to debate.

The polls suggest that we might well have a hung parliament, so we have to be ready for the influence of the smaller parties.

Liberal Democrats

Liberal Democrats promise to defend education budgets and to prioritise early years. They are committed to giving every primary pupil a free school meal. Beyond this, policies are signalled but not specified – a piece of self-protection that is the end result of their damaging stand-down on tuition fees after the last election. They recognise that their best possible future is in some sort of alliance for which they have left themselves negotiating space.

Nonetheless, the Lib Dems do put education high on their agenda. They suggested in spring that they would strengthen the teaching profession by expanding the number of teaching schools and by making B the minimum entry requirement in English and maths. They also proposed a 'curriculum for life' addressing, for example, personal finance and sex education, as well as slimming down the National Curriculum core. The last slimming-down of the core – to which Lib Dems were a party – made it even longer than its predecessor. Fingers crossed for next time!

UKIP

UKIP have promised to establish a grammar school in every town, though it's not clear how this will play in remote and densely urban areas. They propose that parents should hold 30 per cent of the seats on the



governing body, that reductions in immigration can ease pressure on school places, and that all examinations be set by a single examining board.

Beyond this, policy is rather thin at the time of writing, though there may be further announcements.

Past proposals include a vocational apprenticeship worth four GCSEs, the scrapping of sex education below the age of seven, the introduction of school vouchers and the replacement of Ofsted and LAs with 'independent bodies'. As part of a Conservative-UKIP alliance, one can see how education policy would be pushed towards a handful of specific traditional policies.

Green Party

Green Party policies are eye-catching. The party aims would move us towards compulsory education for seven to 14-year-olds only, and put an end to testing and benchmarking. At this time, they are specifically proposing to abolish tests in Key Stage 1 and move back the start of education to six if parents support it. Spectacularly, the party's goals include a cap on class size at 20 pupils.

The Greens favours pushing decisions down to the most local level possible, and will reabsorb academies and free schools into the LA. It aspires to make early years education free to all and to refocus the Key Stage 1 curriculum on play and social skills. The big question is how all this will be afforded and managed.

The devolution factor

The four countries of the UK already have discrete education policies and they do manage to combine this with a very modest amount of co-operation, for example, in international testing. It would be no bad thing if there were to be more co-operation and mutual challenge. We spend many hours gazing enviously at Finland, China and Singapore when we could learn useful lessons from our immediate neighbours.

Don't forget that regional parties can influence UK-wide policies when the government has a narrow

majority. We saw this happen on the tuition fees a few years ago. William Hague has proposed an English veto to stop regional parties making unpalatable decisions for their English counterparts, but there is a long way to go to make that workable. Demographics suggest that such a move would make English policies – including education – veer steeply to the right.

Not done yet

Electioneering through the modern media means that parties hold back announcements to drip-feed to the public as part of an extended campaign. We may not yet have seen all they have to offer. Keep your ears open for new policies.

Sue Hackman is an Education Trainer, Consultant and Writer. She was Chief Adviser on School Standards at the Department for Education from 2006 to 2013, and has recently teamed up with Imaginative Minds to publish *Climbing Frames*, a print and digital assessment framework to replace the now defunct National Curriculum levels.

Knowledge trails

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