



Education Answers **LBMW** briefing No 9

GENERAL ELECTION 2017: manifestos of the principal parties

This paper is a note of the main proposals as they affect schools and some comments on them, rather than a systematic analysis of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat manifestos in their entirety. In the light of the electoral situation, we have spent rather more time on the Conservative document than on the others.



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STANDARDS

We need hardly say that all three parties want a high achieving, world-class education system. They also all want greater educational opportunities for current under-achievers and expect those to lead to more employable young people and to a more vibrant economy. For the Conservatives this is also expected to lead to a reduction in immigration. The differences between the three lie in the means chosen to gain these desirable ends!

The Conservative manifesto introduces the concept of a "Great Meritocracy", and has some new proposals, not only the expected grammar schools but also "specialist maths schools" in "every major city". Consequently legislation removing the prohibition on further selective schools will be brought in rapidly by the Conservatives, though selective schools will be required to admit children not only at age 11 but later as well. It is presumably anticipated that "late developers" can be transferred in this way. There is also mention of some

provision to ensure access by poorer families who cannot afford housing in the catchment areas of good schools. How this will be handled in admissions legislation is not explained beyond saying that admissions are subject to review, nor how the establishment of such selective institutions will be prevented from having a serious negative effect on other local schools, nor the criteria by which schools will be chosen to be given these powers. It is not clear to what extent such powers would be available only to the secondary and tertiary phases. The Conservatives will also prohibit councils from creating any new places in schools that have been rated either "inadequate" or "requires improvement" by Ofsted.

As part of the partnership developments which are at the heart of the Conservative plans, the British Museum and others will be expected to develop teaching materials. In part this is to enable a broader curriculum which is less focussed on "teaching to the test". However it does not seem that any tests are to be abolished and the Conservatives will "improve schools' accountability at KS3", which does not sound like less testing.



MONEY

In rough terms the Conservatives are promising an extra £4B, Labour an extra £6.3B and the Liberal Democrats an extra £7B over the lifetime of the parliament which will include an increase in the Early Years Pupil Premium. The Conservative manifesto claims that this is "a more than real terms increase for each year". However nothing is said as how this fits with the increased costs due to larger pupil numbers, or whether the 100 new Free Schools a year are going to be mainly for basic need or for extra places provided where existing local schools are in Ofsted categories and consequently will now be prevented from expanding, or about how the savings from free lunches in KS1 balance out against the costs of free breakfasts for all – and so on. It is our view that £4B will in practice result in greater pressures on the revenue budgets of all schools and that even the £7B is not going to result in much more than an ability to cope overall with the extra demands.

In consequence the Conservatives will be looking for funds from other bodies. At least 100 leading Independent Schools will be sought to become involved in academy sponsorship or the founding of Free Schools. This will undoubtedly involve those schools committing real resources and meeting real costs. If progress is not made the Conservatives keep open the option of changing the tax status of these schools.

Labour will remove the VAT exemption on private school fees in order to fund free school meals (lunches?). It will also reduce class sizes to under 30 for at least KS1 and perhaps beyond. This too has cost implications not met from the VAT change.

Similarly universities seeking to charge maximum tuition fees will be required by the Conservatives to become involved in academy sponsorship or the funding of Free Schools. Again there will be real resource implications for these universities.

Nothing is said about the accumulated deficits of MATs (just as silence is being maintained about the accumulated deficits of NHS Trusts at the moment) but we are aware of the extent to which in practice there is pressure on private funds (dioceses, trustees for

example) to help fill gaps inherited from the LA management and funding of maintained schools. This is surely not going to reduce.

Labour is proposing a new "National Education Service" on the lines (it is suggested) of the NHS. Whether this would lead to a reduction in deficit budgets must (by comparison with the NHS) be very open to question. How the national role would interlock with more local responsibilities (if any remain) is also not clear.

All three parties propose a new national funding formula under which no-one will lose! This must consequently lead to extra costs met by the promised increases or saved by efficiency savings in existing operations. The problems this will generate are bound to be most acute in Conservative hands both because of the limited extra funding promised and because of the extent to which any future solution will have to take account of their recent failed attempt.

So is the financial position of schools going to improve? Definitely not under the Conservatives: perhaps marginally under the others. The Conservatives will be seeking to rely on the resources of other bodies such as universities, Independent Schools and employers.



ADMISSIONS

The Conservatives promise a review of the admissions code to counter the inflationary effect of successful schools on local house prices. There will however be no "mandatory lottery-based policy". Quite what alternatives might be in view is not revealed. We anticipate only increasing complexity in an already complex system.

The Conservatives also plan that new faith designated academies (though only RC ones are actually mentioned) will be able to admit 100% pupils of their faith provided that they can "prove" that parents of other faiths would seek admission if places were available. Whether this might lead to the establishment of more single faith segregated schools (of whatever faith) and whether this would be desirable overall is not addressed.



TEACHERS

All three parties express a desire to support teachers. The most explicit proposals are those of the Conservatives who promise graduate bursaries, the "forgiveness" of student loan repayments while an individual remains a teacher, "dedicated support" and "greater support for teachers in the preparation of lessons and marking". Quite what the latter mean in the context of very limited resources is not set out. The Conservative manifesto also contains a requirement that companies must either appoint a director from the workforce or otherwise ensure special representation of their workers' interests. As drafted this appears to apply to academies but exactly what the effect might be with regards to staff directors of academy companies is not clear. The Liberal Democrats and Labour will remove the 1% cap on teacher salaries. The Conservatives do not suggest this.



STRUCTURES

As noted, Labour is proposing a National Education Service. We presume that this would mean an increased role for the Education and Skills Funding Agency or a successor body. The costs of this presumably sit within the promised £6.3B and are likely to be considerable.

What the role of LAs might continue to be under Labour is not clear except that "Labour will ensure that all schools are democratically accountable". This of course might be national accountability.

The Liberal Democrats want LA's to regain responsibility for place planning and the power to themselves promote new schools.

The Conservatives on the contrary will continue to make all new schools academies/free schools and new faith academies will no longer be restricted to 50% admissions from their faith group. Note however that promoters would have to be able "to prove that parents of other faiths and none would be prepared to send their children to that school." This will probably lead to there being no new VA schools, though the statutory power to create such is not (as far as we can tell) planned to be removed. Labour would no longer have Free Schools and so presumably would create new academies (which are the same thing!) or perhaps go back to allowing new maintained schools. This not clear. Nor is it clear how hard the Conservatives would press for the continued conversion of existing maintained schools into academies. Nothing is said by the Conservatives to suggest that the existing legislation requiring conversion for failing and coasting schools would be repealed but our expectation is that financial resources will not permit large numbers of voluntary conversions. The present muddle of academies and maintained schools is likely to remain with us for the whole of the coming parliament. No party is suggesting otherwise.

The Conservatives also pledge themselves to "support" village schools. How this will fit with the management of existing and surely increasing revenue pressures is not explained. It is however a significant policy for the Church England which has many small village schools inherited from the 19th century pattern of provision parish by parish.



FE AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Both Labour and Conservatives explicitly address the development of technical education and FE generally. Labour would make FE available free with a lifelong entitlement. The Conservatives propose the creation of new "institutes of technology" with possible "royal charter status and regius professorships in technical education". Existing qualifications will be replaced by "T-Levels". Employers will be "at the centre of these reforms" and may well we suspect find themselves expected to meet much of the cost. All of this links to the newly expanded Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education which is itself closely linked to the Education and Skills Funding Agency.



SUMMARY

Each manifesto makes it easy to see the aspirations of each party. They are essentially the same - better schools, more equitable opportunities for pupils from every area and

background, more technical education and other specialisms, and more and happier teachers.

Conservatives and probably Labour plan to continue the move to the centralised, national provision/control of education which has been such a feature of recent years. The Liberal Democrats appear to have a more Local Authority-focussed approach.

The Conservatives plan to carry out the policies that have already been trailed, including some version of a new national funding formula. All parties will address this particular issue and will provide some more money but in most cases only enough (or more likely not enough) to meet the increased costs required for more children and extra responsibilities.

The inevitable gap in resource is for the Conservatives the area to be filled by Independent Schools, universities and employers. The others rely more on taxation. But in no case will resources really be substantially increased.

There are interesting proposals for technical education designed to fill the skills gap.

If as anticipated we find ourselves with a new Conservative government the future seems likely to follow the routes already signalled. It looks most unlikely however that these will be adequately funded and one of the consequences will be the continuation of mixed academy and maintained school provision. Doing much more on the basis of very little more funding seems the inevitable consequence. How positively the teaching profession will respond and how recruitment and staff retention will be improved in this kind of context is surely doubtful, as is the overall impact on standards or the likelihood of any real improvement in the life opportunities of children in the most deprived areas of the country.



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