Liberal Democrats in coalition: education

'The school of hard knocks': the role of Liberal Democrats in the coalition's education policy

Simon Griffiths

David Laws (Liberal Democrat Schools Minister 2012–15) and Michael Gove (Conservative Secretary of State for Education, 2010–14)

In December 2010, Michael Gove, the Conservative Secretary of State for Education, wrote that it has become fashionable 'to refer to the coalition as a Maoist enterprise. Not so much because the government is inhabiting the wilder shores of the Left, but because of the relentless pace of modernisation being pursued across government'.[1] Gove may have been the pilot of school reform in England, but Liberal Democrat education ministers in his department were often willing first officers. Over the next five years, the coalition government undertook one of the most radical periods of structural reform to the education system in recent history, driving through a marketising agenda from the centre across significant areas of education policy. In this article, I focus on the coalition's policies on schools and higher education in England. (Education is a devolved responsibility in the UK, with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland operating different systems.) There is much else that could have been written about education policy between 2010 and 2015 – the disagreements over curriculum reform, the scrapping of the Education Maintenance Allowance, or reforms to GCSEs and A-Levels – however, in this very brief article it is the pro-market radicalism of the reforms to the system of schools and higher education that is likely to be one of the most significant legacies of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition. This article explores the Liberal Democrats' role

in these policies and the impact that involvement had on the party.

Higher education: markets and party splits

The coalition government carried out sweeping reforms to marketise higher education in England. The Browne Review – more formally *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education: an independent review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance* – published its findings in October 2010. Amongst other things, the review argued that there should be no limit on university fees, and that government should underwrite fees up to £6,000, with universities subject to a levy on all fees charged above that level. In addition, a new body, the Higher Education Council, would be responsible for investing in priority courses, enforcing quality levels and improving access. It should have the power to bail out struggling institutions and would be able to explore options such as mergers and takeovers if institutions faced financial failure. There was also scope for new providers to enter the system. Browne proposed that students should not have to pay any tuition fees up front, but would begin to pay their loans back (with interest) once their earnings reached £21,000.

Vince Cable, the Liberal Democrat Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, responded that he accepted the 'broad thrust' of the Browne Review. Cable had previously been seen as favouring a graduate tax. However, by the time the proposals reached parliament in November 2010, certain concessions had been made, for which the Liberal Democrats claimed credit. In particular, the government put forward an absolute cap on fees of £9,000 per year. In an effort to mitigate criticisms that the review would discourage poorer people from applying, the government also proposed that universities charging fees of over £6,000 per year would have to contribute to a National Scholarships programme and introduced a stricter regime of sanctions encouraging high-charging universities to increase participation. Despite government assurances that this would lead to price variation in the market, the overwhelming majority of universities charge fees at the top rate.

The adoption of a 'Revised Browne Review' introduced a new model of marketised higher education. While earlier reforms under New Labour ended 'free' university education, coalition policy had radical implications for the way in which higher education is provided in England. Gone was the idea that higher education was a public good, determined by academics, and paid for from public funds. In its place was the view that consumer choice, determined by student numbers, would decide which institutions, subjects and modules would survive in a market context. A university, like any other business, can now fail if it does not attract students as consumers, regardless of whether it is carrying out work in the public good. For Liberal Democrats on the left of the party, this policy caused significant ideological discomfort.

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In courting the Liberal Democrats as potential partners in the coalition, the Conservatives recognised that the future funding of higher education was a divisive issue. The Liberal Democrats went into the 2010 general election on a manifesto pledge to 'scrap unfair university tuition fees'. Every Liberal Democrat MP elected in 2010 – much to their subsequent collective embarrassment – signed a pledge organised by the National Union of Students stating that they would 'vote against any increase in fees in the next parliament and pressure the government to introduce a fairer alternative'. Opposition to increased tuition fees was a potent vote winner for the party, especially among student voters. As such, the coalition agreement noted that 'If the response of the government to Lord Browne's report is one that Liberal Democrats cannot accept, then arrangements will be made to enable Liberal Democrat MPs to abstain in any vote'. This broke the earlier pledge, which promised the party would vote against any increase in fees, rather than simply abstaining. However, this went largely unnoticed amidst the bigger story of coalition formation. At the very least, Liberal Democrats were not bound to support any increase in tuition fees.

The Liberal Democrat leadership accepted the Revised Browne Review, but were prepared to abstain in the parliamentary vote on the measure, in line with the coalition agreement. However, when it became clear that a significant number of Liberal Democrat MPs would vote against any increase in fees, in line with their public promise, the leadership called on the party to support the legislation to ensure that it passed. The party split. When it came to the vote in December 2010, twenty-eight Liberal Democrats supported the government's proposals – despite their pre-election pledge – with twenty-one breaking the government line to vote against. It was the most serious split the coalition had faced and destroyed many voters' trust in the Liberal Democrats. In 2012, the party leader, Nick Clegg, apologised for breaking the tuition fee pledge. It made no difference to his party's fortunes: the damage had been done and the legislation remained in place. The party's poll figures, which had fallen on entering government, fell further – often to single digits. The Liberal Democrats flatlined in the polls until their collapse at the 2015 general election. The episode damaged Clegg's and the party's reputation for the remainder of the coalition (and perhaps beyond).

The split reflected an ideological division in the Liberal Democrats between the more pro-market 'Orange Book' Liberals – who had long viewed the policy of opposing tuition fees as a

low priority, and unaffordable given the economic context – and the more social democratic wing of the party. The election of Nick Clegg as party leader and the decision to go into coalition with the Conservatives over a tired Labour Party marked the triumph of these Orange Book Liberals. Strategically, however, even the party's most vehement defenders admitted that accepting a form of the Browne Review, despite being given an explicit opt out in the coalition agreement, was a disaster for the party.2

Schools policy: academies and the pupil premium

Schools policy has been dominated by the hollowing out of local authority power, which was passed upwards to the Secretary of State and downwards to academies operating in a quasi-market system. While the Conservative, Michael Gove, led these reforms with revolutionary zeal, Liberal Democrat ministers in his department – Sarah Teather and then David Laws – were in no way reactionary opponents. The Academies Act (2010) was one of the first pieces of legislation to be passed by the coalition. The Act made it possible for all state schools in England to gain 'academy status'. Academies are publicly funded independent schools that have significant autonomy from the state. Schools can either convert to academies on their own or as part of a 'chain', run by private or charitable organisations. Most academies are at secondary level, although there are some at primary level too. In May 2010, Gove wrote to every head teacher in England to encourage them to apply for academy status.

The Academies Act also made possible the introduction of 'free schools' – an even more radical move. This was part of the coalition agreement, which promised to 'promote the reform of schools in order to ensure that new providers can enter the state school system in response to parental demand'. Derived from charter schools in the USA and free schools in Sweden, English free schools are all-ability state-funded schools, free of local authority control. Under the plans it became much easier for charities, businesses, or groups of parents, for example, to set up new schools.

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To some degree, 'academisation' is an extension of the grant maintained schools programme introduced by former Conservative Secretary of State for Education Kenneth Baker in 1988, which already gave some schools considerable freedom from local authorities, and a continuation of the academies brought in by New Labour from 2000. However, the coalition pushed forward with the idea more strongly than the previous Labour administration. The result has been a dramatic rise in the number of academies. By late 2014 there were around 4,000 academies, almost twenty times as many as in 2010. In addition, 250 free schools have been created by parents or community groups, with another 112 pending, all with the same freedoms as academies.[3] 'Academisation' under the coalition is on a different scale to anything that went before.

The reforms were controversial. Critics of the academy and free school models have, amongst other things, attacked the freedoms these new schools have – described by one teachers' leader as the ability to teach 'creationism instead of literacy'.[4] For some analysts, the academy programme, with its extensive use of private companies to run schools, meant 'the beginning of the end of state education'.[5] Yet for Liberal Democrats in government, the freedom that schools would have from state control outweighed these concerns. David Laws, from the economically liberal right of the party, in particular, backed his Secretary of State, Michael Gove, and was a committed partner in prising schools from perceived state interference.

A second significant policy development was the introduction of a 'pupil premium'. The policy is most associated with the Liberal Democrats, but was put forward by both coalition partners in their 2010 manifestos – although the Liberal Democrats described it as a 'priority policy'.[6] The introduction of the pupil premium was confirmed in the Comprehensive Spending Review on 22 November 2010, committing government to 'a substantial new premium worth £2.5 billion, targeted on the educational development of disadvantaged pupils'.[7] This was expanded upon in the Schools' White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, published two days later. However, the White Paper also noted that, 'This money will not be ring-fenced at school level, as we believe that schools are in the best position to decide how the premium should be used to support their pupils.'[8]

The redistributory nature of the pupil premium means that some schools with pupils from predominantly better off backgrounds had to make significant cuts. Indeed, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) estimated that 87 per cent of secondary pupils and 60 per cent of primary pupils were attending schools where funding had fallen.[9] The extent of the changes in the schools budget led to a backlash against the pupil premium, particularly in the right-wing press – which strongly associated the scheme with the Liberal Democrats, despite its existence in both coalition partners' manifestos.[10]

Support for the policy was stronger in theory than in practice. The IFS was cautious, arguing that, whilst in principle a pupil premium could narrow the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils, the policy was not enough to lead to schools actively recruiting more disadvantaged pupils. According to IFS models, the premium would need to be higher to sufficiently reduce the disincentive for schools to attract disadvantaged pupils. As such, they concluded, the pupil premium was unlikely to significantly reduce social segregation at the rate it was

set.[11] It may be that wider austerity measures during the coalition hindered the investment needed for progressive measures, such as the pupil premium, to make a significant difference.

There is some degree of policy continuity between the coalition and New Labour on schools policy. Academies mark a long-term move from a (theoretically) universal service to one in which the school system is shaped by parental choice, with the quasi-market subsidised by a premium for poor pupils to increase social justice. (A more radical application came from the comedian Paul Merton, who once joked that it would sometimes be easier if parents were given choice of children, rather than just schools.) However it is the scope and radicalism of the coalition reforms – rolling out a market-based system to all schools – that constitutes a step-change from anything that went before. This marketising approach is consistent with the radical reform of higher education undertaken during the same period.

Conclusions

The coalition's legacy in education will be significant. The administration used the power of a strong central state to marketise the education system in England. On schools' policy, the coalition is likely to be remembered for the academies programme, which is increasingly severing the link between schools and the democratically accountable local authorities that once ran them. In many cases, the local authority has been replaced by private companies, which run chains of academies, effectively privatising some schools. This marks a radical departure from the politics of the recent past. In higher education, this marketising approach went further, turning university education into a lightly regulated market, structured around student choice. In office, the coalition used the strong central state to push through market-based reforms that are fundamentally changing the structure of education in England.

While the policies put forward by the coalition on education policy demonstrated a pro-market radical zeal, they were largely supported by senior Liberal Democrats. In particular, while there was disagreement around the margins on various specific policies, Liberal Democrat ministers in the Department for Education – particularly David Laws – were firmly behind the flagship policy to radically shake up the organisation of schools through academisation and free schools. On higher education, the implementation of a revised Browne Review was more difficult for the party. While there was a group around the leader who felt that the policy was sensible and ideologically sound, more than any other single issue, higher education policy highlighted the ideological fissures within the party and destroyed the high trust ratings the party leader in particular once held.

While senior figures in the party felt that they had tempered the policy, the public – particularly student voters – missed these nuances. As such, the Liberal Democrat's decision to support the Conservatives on higher education policy, despite an explicit opt out, proved electorally disastrous, and the party – already being punished by former supporters for their decision to enter into coalition – never recovered.

Dr Simon Griffiths is a Senior Lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London. He teaches and writes about British politics and public policy. His latest book is Engaging Enemies: Hayek and the Left *(Rowman and Littlefield International, 2014).*

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Commentary: former minister

David Laws

In my view, Simon Griffiths significantly understates Liberal Democrat education achievements and rather exaggerates the significance of the so-called marketisation of schools and higher education.

There were three big Liberal Democrat successes under the coalition in education – and most teachers and head teachers would I think share this view. Simon has only mentioned one of these achievements, and even here has reached the wrong conclusion.

Firstly, the Liberal Democrats insisted on an excellent funding deal for schools. We rejected Conservative plans to cut the real education budget (by freezing school spending in cash terms), and insisted instead on a £2.5bn pupil premium, to help narrow the gap between disadvantaged pupils and other students. This quite deliberately focused extra resources on the schools in greatest need, but it is simply not accurate to suggest that most other schools received significant cuts. With rising pupil numbers and frozen pay, most schools found that they were exempted from the service impact of public-sector austerity – thanks entirely to the Liberal Democrats. Meanwhile, the pupil premium was (amongst teachers) probably the most popular coalition education policy – and early evidence suggests that it is helping to narrow the disadvantaged gap, particularly in primary schools.

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The second big Lib Dem contribution was in Early Years education. Here, Nick Clegg and Sarah Teather insisted on expanding early education to 2 year olds in the most disadvantaged households. And later in the parliament we introduced an Early Years pupil premium. Both changes were achieved in the face of active Conservative opposition. Both will help to narrow the gap where it currently opens fastest – in the earliest years. Other planned changes to improve the Early Years workforce were, sadly, either vetoed by Michael Gove or suffered from budget constraints.

The third huge Liberal Democrat achievement was in the area of qualifications and accountability. Not only did Nick Clegg veto Conservative plans to restore the old O-Level/CSE divide, but thanks to Lib Dem efforts we announced reforms to the key accountability measures for schools. This meant moving from judging schools only on raw attainment (which favours schools in leafy areas), to looking more closely at the progress made by all pupils. In place of Labour's flawed threshold target – the five A*–C threshold measure – came new Progress 8 and Attainment 8 measures. These have multiple benefits: they are fairer to schools in tough areas; they give schools an incentive to help all students, and not just those on the C/D grade borderline; they incentivise a wider curriculum choice; and they allow spaces for non E-Bacc and vocational subjects. These changes may presently be poorly understood by both the media and by the public, but in time they could be as important and beneficial as anything which the coalition government delivered in education policy.

Simon Griffiths focuses a lot of attention on changes to school structures. This tends to be a general political preoccupation and ignores other important policy changes. In my view, Simon has also wildly exaggerated the significance of what he describes as the marketisation and privatisation of English education. It is true that Michael Gove, Andrew Adonis and I all agreed that the minority of very poorly performing local authority schools could be improved by selecting high-quality academy sponsors to take over the schools – usually with new, much stronger, leadership and governance (more important, in my view, than the marginal extra autonomy granted to most academies).

The latest academic data, from the reputable LSE, shows that the generation of Labour-sponsored academies delivered real and significant gains in attainment, particularly for poor pupils. This programme continued under the coalition, but was probably less successful, as in the early days sponsor quality may have been compromised to deliver change quickly. But the big increase in academy numbers which Simon draws attention to did not involve much change at all – certainly not privatisation. Most coalition academies were so called converter academies – generally the same schools, with the same leadership, but no longer under local authority oversight. I was dubious that this programme would deliver big gains in attainment, as the schools saw little real change – indeed many converted only for financial reasons. The latest LSE data shows that 'outstanding' converter academies (as assessed by Ofsted) did better than comparable local authority schools, but that for 'good' and 'requires improvement' converter academies the programme made little difference either way.

My view was that both academy chains and local authorities could be good or bad. I wanted to see a contestable middle tier of both local authorities and chains, where poor providers of either type could be replaced by a better performer. But Michael Gove could not stomach any role for local authorities, so we reached stalemate on this issue – with Liberal Democrats vetoing Conservative attempts to essentially academise the whole school system.

I have written about the sad tale of Liberal Democrat higher education policy in my book, *Coalition* (Biteback, 2016). In my view, investing

extra resources at a time of austerity to abolish tuition fees would have been a crazy education policy. Extra money should clearly be targeted at the early years and in school, to have a real impact on spreading opportunity. The party was foolish not to dump this policy before the 2015 election. However, I accept that having made the manifesto commitment which we did, we should have vetoed any fee rise during the coalition. This was a serious political mistake – though most of our decline in the opinion polls occurred before the tuition fees fiasco of late 2010.

However, the policy devised by Vince Cable and others was carefully calibrated to protect the interests of those from low-income families and those who would have low earnings in the future. As a consequence, there was no adverse impact on access for disadvantaged pupils – indeed exactly the opposite. Compare that to free tuition Scotland, where student numbers have had to be cut.

Simon suggests that our tuition fees and higher education policy was some sort of dramatic boost to the marketisation of the system. It was no such thing. It was simply a continued development of the clear policy direction previously set by the 1997–2010 Labour government. And the higher education system continues to be part funded by government. Indeed, a direct impact of our political u-turn was that English higher education has never been so strong and so well funded.

The Liberal Democrats can be proud of our influence on education policy under the coalition. The decisions we took will significantly improve the quality of education over time, and are strongly progressive – helping those who most need the support of the state.

David Laws was Liberal Democrat Schools Minister 2012–15 and is currently executive chairman of the Education Policy Institute and the Education Partnerships Group.

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Commentary: critic

Helen Flynn

It is a problem when you put two parties together – one driven by values and one driven by ideology – in a coalition, particularly when the ideologically driven party is so much larger than the values-driven party. So what happened to the Liberal Democrats in coalition can serve as a cautionary tale to any other future 'would-be' junior coalition partner. If it looks as if you have 'sold out' on your values, you will be punished at the ballot box.

In the educational arena, we became particularly unstuck from a values perspective in Simon Griffiths' two areas of focus: academisation in the schools sector and tuition fees in the higher education sector. However, he unfairly ignores other areas of radical reform, evidence and values-based, where the Liberal Democrats achieved some success. I would be disappointed if David Laws in his commentary here were to not focus on these areas to defend the Liberal Democrat record.

But as a party member, with a particular interest in education, the question is: given the circumstances, could we have done more to exert influence in these key areas, so that we could have emerged with our values largely intact, both to improve our electoral prospects and also to have had a wider impact on education policy?

With reference to tuition fees, the Conservatives had long been advocates of tuition fees in the higher education sector and were enthusiastic supporters of the Labour Party when they introduced them. The Liberal Democrats at grass-roots level had always opposed them, though there were a significant number of senior members who were in fact pro-tuition fees, including Nick Clegg. Recognising this split in the party and the fact that virtually all Lib Dem PPCs had pledged their support to the NUS 'no rise in tuition fees' campaign, Clegg negotiated the right in the coalition agreement to abstain on any vote on tuition fees. But when it came to the Commons vote some Lib Dem MPs abstained (eight) but twenty-one voted against and twenty-eight voted for the policy—it was chaotic.

Surely the right and sensible approach should have been for all Lib Dem MPs, whether involved in government or not, to abstain on the vote? This is, after all, what Clegg had negotiated. Even though there was a group of Lib Dem MPs ready to rebel and vote against the rise, arguably Clegg and his colleagues in government would have been more true to the Lib Dem position and would have emerged more unscathed had they all abstained.

The fact that our leadership was left looking to the general public like a party who could so easily row back on pledges was not the right tactic – politically or morally – for a values-based party. And there was a heavy, heavy price to pay for it. We must have looked like political ingénues to the more experienced Conservatives, particularly as the net effect of the way we voted was to have no real effect as a party on the eventual vote. It was breathtaking naivety to assume we could get away with it, especially with the right-wing media waiting to exploit any stumble from us. It left party members squirming and there was to

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be an immediate and ongoing price to pay at local elections.

The Conservatives had also been keen supporters of the academies that Labour had introduced in 2002, as they built on the Conservative policy of City Technical Colleges which had been introduced in the 1988 Education Reform Act. Grass-roots members of the Lib Dems opposed academies, seeing them as undermining local government and not being sufficiently publicly accountable, though some senior members, including Clegg, were not opposed to academies. No one, however, in the Lib Dem party was advocating that all schools become academies, but it is very clear now from the speed and alacrity with which Michael Gove introduced the academies bill so soon after the general election that this was his 'project'. Could Clegg have done more to stop the steamroller?

Arguably, he could have installed at the Department of Education (DfE) a minister with more experience of education and education policy, rather than Sarah Teather who had limited experience and concentrated her efforts almost solely on the Special Educational Needs brief she had been given. It effectively left us flying blind at the DfE, and without an advocate who could more effectively fight the Lib Dem corner. For a party that had campaigned extensively on being the 'party for education', more should have been done to install an education 'heavyweight' in a ministerial post at the DfE at the first opportunity. (After he was appointed Schools Minister in 2012, David Laws was to show just what such an education specialist could achieve.)

Maybe Clegg himself, as deputy prime minister, could also have exerted more power to slow the juggernaut down, and to ensure that the bill was not enacted until after the summer recess. Rarely can any bill have reached royal assent so quickly – a mere ten weeks after the general election.

Many commentators argue that the Academies Act is the most significant development in education reform since the Butler Education Act of 1944. Maybe the Liberal Democrats were too new to government to have stopped it outright, but surely more could have been done to both slow it down and amend it?

It is a shame that these Conservative-led, ideological, pro-market reforms so heavily dominate the general analysis of coalition education reforms, as the Liberal Democrats did have a significant input and arguably punched above their weight in many areas of education reform. Much of politics, however, is about instinct, and understanding what the big issues really are – the ones you need to fight tooth and nail.

For the party leadership to have got it so instinctively wrong on the way to handle the tuition fees issue, and not to have foreseen the legacy of the Academies Act and how it would so radically overhaul the English schools system has, by any account, tested the loyalty of some Liberal Democrat members severely, and undoubtedly played a significant role in the fate of the party at the 2015 general election.

Helen Flynn is an executive member of the Liberal Democrat Education Association and chair of the Social Liberal Forum. She has stood twice as a parliamentary candidate for the Liberal Democrats in 2010 and 2015, was an elected Harrogate Borough Councillor (2012–2016), and served on the Federal Policy Committee between 2013 and 2015.