

Education - Back to Our Roots

Policy Retrospective

By Tony Little and Duncan Brack

Recent Liberal Democrat education campaigns rest on a long history. This year celebrates the 125th anniversary of the passing of Forster's Education Act of 1870, the first to provide for compulsory primary education and the first to authorise mainstream education via the state.

Until 1870, education was largely a matter of the higgledy piggledy growth of charitable foundations, church schools and the sort of private enterprises satirised in Dickens' Dotheboys Hall. In the 1851 Census, while there were over 10,000 church schools educating more than 1 million children, and more than 29,000 private schools with nearly 700,000 pupils, there were only 610 schools supported by taxation. Of these, 523, with over 38,000, pupils were attached to workhouses.

Liberals were in the forefront of those promoting a voluntary approach to education. It was education which first brought Cobden and Bright together and Cobden was one of the first to push for state involvement on the American model. The movement for state education made little progress at first but in 1861 a commission chaired by the Peelite Duke of Newcastle reported that in important areas of the country, particularly the fast growing industrial areas, schools were not reaching large numbers of children and were not providing an adequate education. The immediate result was a move to payments by results (sounds familiar?). Schools were paid 4/- (20p) per child in attendance, and 2/8d (13p) per pupil per subject for passing annual examinations in reading, writing and arithmetic.

Further reform was hindered by the resistance of parents. In poor families, children were expected to work and therefore needed little education, effectively condemning them to perpetuate their poverty. For such parents the burden of school fees was too high. Nevertheless, political interest in education was strengthened by the widening of the franchise to a portion of the working classes in 1867 and by a growing awareness of the superiority of German industrial and educational processes. Religious disputes were important too: Anglicans were anxious to ensure that teaching continued to reflect the established religion, while Nonconformists wanted such religious teaching to be separated from schools supported by taxpayers.

W. E. Forster, Vice President of the Council in Gladstone's first government, appeared the right man for the job. Of a Quaker background, he was the son-in-law of Thomas Arnold, the reforming head of Rugby, and the brother-in-law of the author Matthew Arnold, one of the first school inspectors. Forster's Education Act of 1870 accepted the church schools but authorised local authorities to establish elected school boards where voluntary schools were inadequate. The boards had the power to levy school fees, and to use government

grants and levy rates to cover the cost for families unable to afford fees. The boards could pass by-laws making school attendance compulsory between the ages of 5 and 13. Campaigning for election to school board places lies at the root of the formal organisation of the Liberal Party and its successors.

Forster's compromise, as modified by the 1902 and 1944 Education Acts, provided the foundations of the modern system of state education. It had important implications for the Liberal Party. In the short run, the principle of state support for church schools angered its Nonconformist supporters, and Nonconformist abstentions were an important factor in the defeat of the Liberal Government in 1874. In the longer run, however, the pressure group formed to fight for a secular system of state education, the National Education League, helped to bring Joseph Chamberlain into national politics, and in 1877 evolved into the National Liberal Federation, the organisation of Liberals outside Parliament.

The Balfour Education Act of 1902 had a similar impact on the Nonconformist conscience to that of the Forster Act; but this time it was Conservative legislation which was objectionable. In providing rate aid to church schools, the Act drove thousands of Nonconformists back to the Liberal Party and provided an important milestone in the career of David Lloyd George, who became the leading spokesman for Welsh Nonconformist opposition to the legislation. George White, Liberal MP for North West Norfolk, organised a movement of passive resistance in which dissenters refused to pay their rates; by 1906 over 70,000 summonses had been issued and 176 Nonconformists sent to gaol.

In 1906, outrage over the Balfour Act helped to sweep the Liberals back into power in one of the greatest electoral landslides this century. The Education Act of 1906 removed the most obnoxious elements of the Balfour Act. (It still, however, retained provision for the public funding of church schools in urban areas where 80% of parents petitioned for it - an attempt to curry favour with the Irish Nationalists which in the long run undermined Nonconformist enthusiasm for the Liberals.) In 1918, Lloyd George, the last Liberal Prime Minister, finally abolished school fees.

This is the first in a series of 'policy retrospective' articles, examining the historical roots of major areas of current Party policy. The articles are also published in Liberal Democrat News; their space constraints may lead to some editing. The next issue will include an article on international trade.

Archive Sources

The Liberal Democrat History Group aims to provide a guide to archive sources for students of the history of the Party and its predecessors. Liberal Democrat archives are stored in the LSE Library, which also contains much Liberal Party material; SDP archives are kept at Essex University. We would like to hear from anyone knowing the whereabouts of any relevant archive material, including the records of local and regional parties, internal groups, and so on. Please write to Duncan Brack at the address on the back page.