

ASCL 6/03/10
Nick Clegg

Good morning.

I'd like to thank John and John for the invitation to speak today. When General Secretary John speaks tomorrow, it will be his thirteenth conference speech. And, sadly, his last.

John has been a huge asset not only to the ASCL, but also to the national debate on education. In 28 years he has had just 2 jobs – he used to be the head of Durham Johnston Comprehensive School. Compare that to the average Secretary of State for Education, who last, on average, just over two years. Or so John tells me, at least.

I'm a liberal.

I don't believe governments should fix every problem in our society from the centre.

I don't believe governments can.

When it comes to our children's education, central government, schools, communities and families must work together.

On Monday, in a speech to the Salvation Army, I called on parents to enter into a deal with the Liberal Democrats. My message was this: we will make your children's education an absolute priority in government. Help us by making it an absolute priority in your homes too.

Today, I ask our schools and colleges to sign up to a deal with the Liberal Democrats too:

We will give you everything we can.

We will find you extra funding, even while elsewhere there are cuts.

We will give a level of freedom you haven't known for decades.

But, in return, we will place the greatest expectations on you any government ever has.

One - we will expect you to transform the curriculum, so that it is rich, relevant, and stretches the brightest pupils while elevating those who struggle.

Two - we will be much more ambitious about the number of young men and women leaving school with good results.

Three – we will expect you to close the gap between poorer children and their wealthier classmates. A gap which entrenches inequality in Britain today.

That deal is a new settlement for schools and government. Once it is in place we will get on with governing, you will get on with teaching, and children will benefit most of all.

Let's take our side of the bargain first. The country's finances are in an appalling state.

At over £170bn, Britain's deficit is around 12-13% of GDP. There will be a need for a sharp fiscal contraction to bring down that deficit. In other words, there will be cuts.

My party understands it would be madness to cut now, choking off our fragile recovery. But, once the economy is stable, we will take the tough decisions about what the country can and cannot afford in order to rebalance the nation's books.

So under the Liberal Democrats, for example, there would be no like for like replacement of the Trident missile system. A cold war relic we no longer need nor can afford.

We would take above average earners out of the tax credits system. At a time of unprecedented economic strife, they should not receive these extra benefits.

We would cap public sector pay increases at £400 for two years. Because faced with job losses, we choose pay restraint instead. But pay restraint that ensures those on the lowest wages see the biggest proportionate gain.

And we'll end government contributions to Child Trust Funds. Not because it wouldn't be lovely to give every baby a £250 cheque to cash when they're 18. But because, when the Government is in billions of pounds of debt, there are better ways to help children growing up today.

We'll make these and other savings so that we can pay down the deficit. But we'll make these savings also because there are still two immediate priorities we need to spend money on.

One of them is jobs. We have committed to new investment in green technologies and to create hundreds of thousands of internships.

The other is education. Because the Liberal Democrats will not allow our children to have their life chances blighted by the recklessness of this generation.

We are proposing an extra investment of £2.5bn for our schools. Money that will be targeted to schools taking pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Around an extra £2500 will be allocated for each pupil in receipt of free school meals. Raising the amount allocated for the poorest children to levels spent per pupil in fee paying schools.

That's how we can stop these children falling behind, which helps the whole class. And it is crucial if we are to build a society that is truly fair. Where opportunities are open to every child.

The budgets of schools with similar catchments, but in different parts of the country, can vary wildly. Our Pupil Premium ensures every school taking a child from a disadvantaged background, no matter where it is, gets extra money to provide extra support.

Money you can spend as you see fit – perhaps to cut class sizes, provide extra one-to-one tuition, evening or weekend classes... It would be up to you.

Unlike the Conservatives, who have promised money to help poorer pupils without actually allocating a single penny to pay for it, we want to give schools certainty about the resources they can expect.

So, to be absolutely clear: our Pupil Premium is new money. As the IFS pointed out earlier this week, unless a Pupil Premium is funded with extra cash, many schools – particularly secondaries – will suffer significant budget cuts.

Funding alone is not enough. If we've learnt one thing from this Labour government, it is that simply throwing money at public services doesn't work. Labour has raised funding on education by about 60%. That increase has been welcome. And there has been improvement in standards – in some schools and in some parts of the country that improvement has been dramatic.

But when 1 in 3 eleven year olds still leaves primary school unable to read and write properly... When almost half of 16 year olds aren't achieving 5 good GCSEs including English and Maths... When around 200,000 16-18 year olds are classified as NEETs. We have to ask ourselves what has gone wrong.

It's this: Labour didn't fund schools, they bought schools. The price of unprecedented investment was untrammelled control.

Since Ed Balls has been in charge, the DCSF has issued over 500 press releases announcing the latest gimmick, central initiative or instruction to teachers. The most recent Education Act alone gave him 153 sweeping new powers. Including the right to handpick reading lists.

And for what? Frenzied meddling from Whitehall does not raise standards. It robs classrooms of innovation. It reduces learning to boxes to tick and targets to meet. And it politicises education, fuelling the – itself mind-numbing – dumbing down debate.

The Liberal Democrats in Government would relinquish that control. We would only pass only one Education Act per parliament. And in our first parliament we would pass an Education *Freedom Act*, banning interference from Ministers in the day to day running of schools. The central Whitehall department would be halved.

And we would scale back quangos like BECTA – how can we trust our schools to educate young minds if we don't even trust them to pick their own computers?

Our ban on political interference would be policed by a new Education Standards Authority. A fully independent guardian of standards, reporting to Parliament, a watchdog that could not be bullied by the Secretary of State.

The new body would replace the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency and OFQUAL - two quangos which are not fully independent.

It would keep a check on standards by sampling performance across different cohorts to compare progress each year, thereby comparing like-with-like.

And it would also include Ofsted, which would narrow its focus to helping underperforming schools turn themselves around.

A Liberal Government would not wash its hands of responsibility. But we would restrict ourselves to a small number of strategic areas; Defining the Minimum Curriculum Entitlement; Setting the levels of Minimum Pupil Funding and Pupil Premium; And defining, through legislation, the broad freedoms and responsibilities that fall to schools.

Local government would have an important role too. I have no intention of substituting Whitehall meddling with Town Hall meddling. But schools are not unconnected from their communities or each other. Local Authorities are a hub that joins them together, that links them up with other services, that can co-ordinate on areas like admissions, and that provide clear lines of democratic accountability.

We recognize that in our plans for Sponsor Managed Schools. Organisations with educational expertise would be allowed to set up schools, massively enhancing the choice available to parents. But these schools would come under the democratic oversight of councils. That is a much better set up than Ed Balls running twenty three and a half thousand schools from his London office.

And it's equally preferable to Michael Gove trying to keep track of hundreds of so-called "free schools", all offering a different curriculum, without any core requirements, in his free market vision.

So, more freedom, more funding, that is our side of the bargain. What about yours?

We will give you money, we will cut the reins, but our expectations on you will be high. We will expect you to raise your game.

We will expect you to reinvent the curriculum so it is broad and relevant.

We will expect you to increase the number of children achieving good results.

We will expect you to close the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their wealthier peers.

It's a new relationship between government and schools. Built on trust rather than blame - the kind of trust that your President spoke of yesterday.

I am tired of the buck passing that dominates the debate over education in this country. When pupils do badly, government blames schools, schools blame government, and parents are left watching endless finger-pointing that does nothing to help their children.

Our children's education is all of our responsibility. That's why I have appealed to those parents who aren't spending enough time on their children's education at home to do so. It's why I have pledged my personal commitment to our schools. And it's why I say to you today: take the money, take the freedom, but take up the challenge too.

First, a new curriculum. At over 600 pages, the current curriculum is more than twice the length of a Brief History of Time. Sweden's framework is about 16 pages. From announcing compulsory cooking in secondary schools to proclaiming children must have five hours of "culture" every week... Cramming the curriculum full is a neat trick for Ministers desperate to look busy.

David Laws relishes the prospect of scrapping the existing curriculum. He would replace it with a light touch, 25 page 'Minimum Curriculum Entitlement' instead. Specifying core entitlements that need to be available to every pupil, like one foreign language and separate sciences.

Beyond that, it will be up to you to deliver a curriculum better suited to your pupils, to your schools... Better suited to Britain today.

I know, from the school leaders I speak to, that any such curriculum would include the option to take more vocational subjects. Many schools feel, like us, the way practical skills are still undervalued is simply wrong. We would help you correct that through our new General Diploma, along the lines proposed by your Association. It would bring together existing qualifications such as GCSEs and A-Levels, as well as proven vocational qualifications and work experience too.

Within that framework, the majority of what you teach will be at your discretion. But make no mistake: we will give you support to get it right... But if you get it wrong, don't imagine we'll stand idly by. Underperforming schools will not be given a blank cheque simply to flounder for years.

And whilst we will clip Ofsted's wings so it is no longer a sprawling inspector, it will still be called on to go into failing schools to turn them around. Head teachers and governing bodies will be removed when they are found to be letting pupils down. And councils that fail in their duties will be named, shamed and ultimately punished by their electors.

I passionately believe in the principle of freedom in our schools. But never at the expense of the life chances of our children.

Second, schools will be expected to do the best for *every* child.

For all Labour's targets, they have always had such little faith in our schools and young people. The National Challenge Programme sets a goal of no school turning out less than 30% of pupils with 5 good GCSEs including English and Maths. Think of that the other way round.

That means it's ok for 70% of pupils in these schools to leave school without decent qualifications – 70%.

Is that really the message we want to send to young people? Most of you, the vast majority, won't do well, so don't even bother.

How dare Gordon Brown talk about aspiration when he has been so woefully unambitious about what Britain's children are capable of? How dare Ministers content themselves with a 30:70 success rate when we should be aiming for 70:30? And how dare any government underestimate the talent right here in this room and in all your staffrooms too?

I don't imagine that every child can get top marks, of course not. But many more are capable of doing much better than they are now. A Liberal Democrat Government will aim high for all children, because that is the only way all children will aim high for themselves.

We'll sustain that ambition by setting our sights on helping every pupil. The Government's lack of aspiration for our children is compounded by crude league tables that encourage schools to focus on pupils at the C/D borderline.

Because that's what Labour's league tables focus on. It completely distorts the school day. Teachers are encouraged to get certain pupils over the D to C hurdle, leaving the higher achieving pupils unstretched, while those who are not performing well are left to struggle.

League tables must be overhauled to reflect the performance of pupils of *all* abilities, so it isn't just those in the middle who are in the spotlight. And so that schools that help pupils at every level are recognized, and those who do not are exposed.

Third, closing the gap between poor and wealthy pupils. It is a source of national shame that the poorest pupils are only half as likely to get 5 good GCSEs as their better-off classmates.

That one in ten of the poorest boys leaves school with just two GCSEs at grade F. That children from the richest households are four and a half times more likely to graduate than those from the poorest.

As long as this inequality blights our education system, it blights our society too. Because it is in our schools that these divides become entrenched.

But schools are also the place we can unleash the talent, ambition and self-confidence that allows disadvantaged children to beat the odds. So Liberal Democrats will help make that happen. Not just through our Pupil Premium and greater autonomy...But also by improving the other public services that should play a role in supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

For example, in health, we will introduce a patient premium to encourage GPs to take more patients from the most deprived areas. And, we will also stop the depressing treadmill that turns the thousands of young offenders of today into the hardened criminals of tomorrow. It is a sign of this Government's self-defeating populism that they have turned our prisons into universities of crime... Where 92% of young men serving a first short term prison sentence re-offend within two years. If we want to tackle the behaviour of young offenders we must get them to face up to their victims and actions. That is the smart approach.

The Liberal Democrats are committed to helping disadvantaged children across our public services. In our schools, closing the gap between them and their better off classmates is not yet another New Labour style target. It's much more important than that – it's a principle at the heart of the Liberal Democrat's vision for a fairer Britain.

Because we want to make Britain a place where it is no longer possible, on a pupil's first day of school, to predict how well they'll do simply by asking them how much parents earn.

So, a deal between government and schools. Money and freedom in return for high expectations and more ambition.

The stakes are high. If we make it work we will finally succeed in giving schools the freedom they deserve and getting politicians permanently off their backs. But if it fails, both liberals and schools lose, because the people who continue to argue that Whitehall should fix everything will not hesitate to impose a central government straightjacket on schools, for good.

I don't want to see that happen. I don't think you do either. But I am optimistic that we can build a new relationship between schools and politicians – one that is built on trust.

Thank you.