

A speculative new year

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January 2022

January columns tempt speculation, especially in uncertain times.

A landslide victory for the opposition parties beckons in 2022 or 2023. Boris Johnson's great hero Winston Churchill experienced similar in 1945, and I have long thought that our PM would follow in those fated footsteps.

Churchill won the war and subsequently lost the peace. Johnson won his Brexit and vaccine wars but lost the people's trust. And his potential successors in the Conservative Party will fail to restore it.

Clement Attlee in 1945 pledged social reform: in housing, in health, in education. That was the Labour project then. Incoming governments need 'big projects' to win at the ballot box - and the people need to believe they are deliverable.

Question: what was bullet point one on Tony Blair's 1997 election pledge card?

- Cut class sizes to 30 or under for 5, 6 and 7 year-olds.

So what will the Labour/Liberal government of 22/23 do in power with the social agenda, in particular in schools and colleges? They need to begin thinking aloud, testing ideas soonest. They need their own pledge card. It's what folk remember. Here are five prompts to begin the conversation.

1. Funding

Children in primary and secondary schools in Keir Starmer's Holborn & St Pancras constituency are funded a third as much again as children in (Shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up) Lisa Nandy's Wigan constituency. And in Nursery, the figures are nearly double. Imagine!

Despite welcome attempts through the National Funding Formula to address historic budget gaps, there remains across the kingdom a funding apartheid to be eradicated: between phases of education and between regions.

Schools in London have been handsomely resourced for decades. The money was once frittered, but not any more. Attainment in the capital's schools, especially for disadvantaged students, now outstrips most parts of the country.

2. Levelling up

The 'levelling up' phrase will doubtless be replaced politically; 'social mobility' to make a return?

The mission remains the same: to transform parts - south, north, east, west - of this rich democracy which still experience lower life expectancy, inadequate housing, poorer education standards, fewer sustained employment opportunities.

This must mean in education that further education colleges receive improved funding and their status is reinvigorated; that high quality apprenticeships in small and medium sized businesses are an integral part of the landscape; that GCSE examination reform brings an end to a system which bakes in failure for a third of students at 16+ in order that two-thirds can pass.

3. Accountability

Lucy Crehan in her seminal book *CleverLands* draws together five principles for high-performing, equitable education systems:

- Get children ready for formal learning
- Design curricula concepts for mastery
- Support children to take on challenges, rather than making concessions
- Treat teachers as professionals
- Combine school accountability with school support.

Each of the above has its distinctive truths and current practices. Yet it is with bullet point five that we are further away than ever when benchmarked against other countries.

Recent years have shown we don't need to live or die by league tables. Ofsted has nudged the system away from a relentless focus on data, vital though data is for tracking students' progress and attainment. At the same time the current inspectorate needs to refresh its practices to work 'with' schools and not 'at' them. The healthy balance of support and accountability eludes us still.

4. Academisation

There is no going back from the academisation of England's schools. It would be folly to plan otherwise. Yet the current hotchpotch is unsustainable. The negative perception of academies in some quarters needs shifting.

An incoming centre-left government should signal a fully academised system (rooted in local clusters) within the lifetime of a parliament, and set about enabling governors, leaders, dioceses and existing MATs to deliver it.

And a fully academised system will only be possible if strong local authorities are enabled legally to establish their own multi-academy trusts.

5. The teaching profession

The oft cited mantra that 'no school system is better than its teachers' has been the drumbeat of the past two years as teachers and leaders have provided welcome continuity in society for the nation's children and young people.

Successive governments for three decades have sought to enhance the profile of school teaching, not always assisted by the profession itself.

The challenge is to establish 'a new profession called teaching' through fresh thinking about its media and self-image, the workplace, remuneration and career structure.*

American politicians talk of 'the third rail' when raising a topic which is charged or untouchable. Over the past couple of years opposition parties' thinking on education has come across as reactive, muddled and timid.

It's time for them to talk *up* and *about* a few third rails - and bring a rejuvenated profession alongside.

***'Must do better: how to improve the image of teaching and why it matters'**
by Harry Hudson & Roy Blatchford is published this month by John Catt Educational.