

GUEST COLUMN – January 2024

A failure to invest in education risks our future prosperity **Dom Burke**

I started my teacher training course at the University of Leeds on Monday 17th September 2001. I remember the specific date because it was less than one week after the horrific events at the World Trade Centre on Tuesday September 11th.

Like most other people I instinctively felt that this was one of those events that would change the world, and so it proved.

In the more than 20 years since, other changes have occurred in our society that were more difficult to predict. My early career was spent during the 'New Labour' years when investment in education reached historically high levels and where there was generally a feel-good factor about teaching. As I entered the profession in 2002 it seemed like education was on the up.

It was also apparent that the policy makers seemed to understand that there was a link between improving standards and the scale of the resource they were prepared to put to the task. The London Challenge was perhaps the most famous and successful example of this.

In retrospect the financial crash of 2008 was crucial in bringing this era to an end although at the time I don't think I realised what a turning point this event would be. The coalition government of 2010 made it clear that their watchword would be efficiency as George Osborne looked to dramatically reduce the size of the state.

The government began cutting funding for education so that in real terms it fell by around 9% during the last decade according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies. I became headteacher of Balcarras in 2016 and so have lived through the years of dramatic real terms cuts.

Decisions on funding have been the single most important factor affecting the running of schools during that time and I include the pandemic in this. In any case the pandemic was necessitated by events largely beyond our control whereas the decision to reduce real terms investment in education was premeditated.

Tony Blair had famously stated that his three priorities for a Labour government would be 'Education, Education, Education'. The government matched resource to rhetoric so that, according to the House of Commons Library, spending on

education as a proportion of total government spending increased from 3.9% in the late 1990s to 5.5% by 2010-11. By 2018 under the weight of austerity measures it had fallen back below 4%.

Whenever I speak to my local MP, who is always generous with his time, he reminds me that there are so many competing interests in the search for increased investment and, of course, this is true. The UK's ageing population has had a drastic impact on the allocation of public money.

When my teaching career began, government spending on education was around 85% the size of the health budget. By 2020 it was closer to 50%. As a country we have made the decision to shift this balance in a most dramatic fashion.

Whilst I appreciate the pressures on the NHS, social care and on welfare, we are making a mistake in allowing our investment in the future to reduce. We are naive if we think that spending less on education now won't affect the ability of our economy to compete in the next three to four decades. We must recognise that maximising investment now will pay dividends in the future by creating a wealthier and more socially mobile population.

There will be a harsh economic reckoning at some point unless we dramatically reverse the decisions taken in the last decade.

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