

THE CHOICE AGENDA

The recent manifesto conference at the LSE saw over 400 members spend a day discussing detailed policy options for the future of our country. A welcome reminder for many of just why we spend so much of our time pounding the streets, delivering leaflets and knocking on doors in all weathers.

Nick made the most of his first speech as Party Leader with an excellent delivery to an appreciative audience.

The core of his policy proposals were met with enthusiasm. A massive decentralisation of power from Westminster to locally elected and locally accountable bodies has long been party policy. Local Income Tax is a well documented and credible alternative to parsimonious Whitehall handouts with strings attached. In Stockholm I have seen how locally elected politicians rather than unaccountable quangos successfully run the Swedish health service.

Local democratic control and local power over taxation work. We also though need to decide how we would deal with Gordon's PSBR control freakery which has dictated bad value PFI for schools and hospitals and the forced privatisation of Council Housing against tenants wishes, all so that borrowing for public investment can be kept off the books.

As a former teacher I was delighted with the bidding war over education funding between the two recent leadership contenders. The UK has just reached the Western European average for investment in education and health for the first time after 23 years of cuts from 1976 to 1999. It was good therefore to hear Nick reaffirm his commitment to the 'pupil premium' policy developed by Phil Willis when he was education spokesman in the 2001-2005 Parliament.

So far then so good, as Nick expounded our commitment to the greatest decentralisation of democratic and accountable power since the extension of mass democracy in the nineteenth century. However, Nick then argued that monumental local democratic empowerment of this kind was not enough and we should pursue a choice agenda for health and education.

Later in the day Professor John Curtice pointed out that this was hardly the issue to give us clear delineation in voter's minds when Tories and New Labour have been promoting it endlessly for many years. The politics of principle and practicality concerned me even more however.

On the NHS Nick suggested that any patient not treated within a pre set waiting time should be able to go private and have the bill picked up by the NHS. Having spent years condemning micro management and the distorting effects of central government health targets are we now to set a waiting time for every medical condition? Until now we have criticised New Labour's Independent Treatment Centres for being paid at a 140% of the NHS rate. Do we now really want instead to extend this to all NHS treatments?

Nick proposed creating 'Free schools'-taxpayer funded but set up by 'parents, educational charities, voluntary and private organisations.' How exactly would this work? Would there be a new pot of money so that such schools could be set up anywhere regardless of already existing local provision –or would their funding come at the cost of existing schools? Will there be any criteria to do with viable pupil numbers or just a bottomless subsidy for small schools that is denied to the mainstream sector? How will social and 'behavioural' selection –of the kind documented as operating in many Faith schools, CTC's and Academies be prevented? If academic selection is to be banned in all new schools why not in existing ones? If the whole point is to allow, "...the freedom from unnecessary political and bureaucratic interference to innovate in the best interests of their pupils" –why not just let state schools have that freedom in the first place?

More pertinent still is the newly published research by the University of London which argues that the application of choice and the market to the school system is problematic and notes:

"There is good cause for concern that choice and competition does not work in favour of those from low socio economic groups."

There are many unanswered questions to resolve before the party can accept that going down this road is the way to marry economic and social liberalism without harming social justice.

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