

election 2017: HE policies

The idea of the University: Brightest and best or free but not easy?

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Readers here won't be in any need of Foucaultian refreshment but, suffice to say,

in these times of Trump, Brexit, almost fascist France, post-Truth and, probably, a Tory victory given up by exiled old Labour supporters via UKIP (WTF?), truth as contingent - and exercised in, rather than through, power - seems to actually be a thing.

On the other hand, it's back to the future for UK politics as far as HE policy goes - a stark choice indeed at this election, for the first time in a good while. Do we accept the hyper-consumerism of TEF or can we believe in the (costed) removal of fees?

Of course it's more complicated. The discourse shift around higher education during my career has delimited the sayable to the extent that those who benefited from free University education can't imagine the possibility of free University education. And those that can't really afford to pay for University education are equally unable to process the notion, like a national Stockholm syndrome, strong and stable version of 'reassuringly expensive'. Those of who want to teach students 'for free', and be paid for doing so 'by the state' are at best crazily naïve, living in the 1970s, or at worst the self-serving 'liberal elite'.

Chomsky was right, in his recent declaration of support for Corbyn, to assert that neoliberal policies have eroded democracy, transferring power from public institutions to markets while failing ordinary people. But Corbyn, despite early promise via Momentum and youth

engagement, might (NB it's thrilling for me that in the second draft I could change this from 'will almost certainly') be the only 'alternative' *not* to seriously challenge the skewed response to 'the establishment' manifested by Trump, Farage, Le Pen. Folks like me, pampered middle class leftists spouting cultural theory (pretty far from the zeitgeist!) espouse 'identitarian' politics - 'fiddling with ourselves while Rome burns' (Zizek, via Will Self, albeit a pretty strong critique).

And so to the task in hand, to write about higher education in the party manifestos:

The Conservatives

Conservatives will support our 'world-beating universities' through investment funds for R&D, to 'enjoy the commercial fruits of their research'. They will fund schemes to progress graduates - again from 'leading universities' into public services, "*taking the brightest and best and using their talents to tackle entrenched social problems*". Brexit will, of course, happen and international students will still contribute to the immigration statistics the manifesto pledges to keep on trying to bring down. Outside of the manifesto, TEF and Stern leave no hiding place from the metric tide. For those of us in universities not commonly understood to be 'world beating'; and therefore neither 'delivering' or, for that matter being ourselves 'the brightest and the best', these things are, of course, double-edged. For all we might rage against the commodification of research, the crude impact

modality and the middle aged, white male 'look at me' citation racket, many of us wouldn't have the jobs we have without REF and, it follows, much less research would get done by the unbrightest and the not best, for sure. Post-92 Universities, however, seem thus far to be resisting teaching-only contracts precisely at the point where Stern provides the excuse, sorry 'external

driver', favouring instead an inclusive approach. The walls come tumbling down as everyone gets to play the game, to stand up and (literally) be counted.

The Green Party

The "Green Guarantee" includes 'Education for All'. As with Labour, they will scrap fees, within a holistic attack on the privatization of education. Abolishing SATs, returning all secondary schools



to local authority, comprehensive status and restoring the EMA is not HE policy as such, but it articulates boldly what the Fair Access discourse has rendered unsayable.

The Liberal Democrats

You don't have to be too cynical to reflect on why the Liberal Democrats might choose 'Putting Children First' over a discrete section on education policy. This is a strange text, shamelessly presenting itself (from page 4 onwards) as a manifesto for opposition. Nevertheless, there are pledges on maintaining Erasmus, research funding and a more 'pragmatic' interim version of the Green's vision, putting teachers first, reducing performance management, pledging to protect arts and creative subjects but then defending their record in coalition over fees and restating their attacks on the Government's previously curtailed 'excesses'. On higher education, as elsewhere, it's a confused approach – there's nothing on TEF or Stern so we assume that goes forward, then on the one hand ridiculing Labour as 'no opposition' but at the same time offering much less meaningful opposition to the leader they declare the winner on the first page, promising only something along the lines of 'we'll make it less worse than it is now, like it was before'.

Labour

And so to Labour. "For the many, not the few' (yep), a section on higher education, outlining the removal of fees, the return of maintenance grants and, to frame this as a bit more 'imaginable' in the 'real world', the point that *University tuition is free in many northern European countries, and under a Labour government it will be free here too* (sounds reasonable). This is preceded by some serious, and all too rare, detailed attention to further education and it's costed – to restore funding for FE and sixth form (equally) in line with Key Stage 4 benchmarks (clear, strong and stable, even?). In balance, though, there's no detail on research or TEF and NSS, but the implication, from both Greens and Labour, *can only be* that with no fees and a genuine focus on social justice and

fair access, then the monetisation of learning and teaching and the aligned 'commercial fruits' of academic labour, would have a limited shelf life.

Conclusion

The choice, then, is clear. Labour and the Greens would roll back the 'metric tide' and return us to free higher education for societal good, along with essential enablers for progression from further education. The Lib Dems will curb the excesses of the Conservatives but, understandably, make few radical pledges and seemingly have no more ambition for office in any case. Tories will plough on with the 'proposed landscape' of UKRI (incorporating Innovate UK but with a 'distinctive business focus'), the Office for Students, TEF ratings linked to RPI inflation, 'new providers in the market' with lighter touch for validation.

As Terry Eagleton observes: "*Writing these things can't be easy. Party manifestos are part sermon, part technical guide. They must be morally uplifting but down to earth, confident but not complacent, inspirational yet briskly practical.*" (2917: 4)

But this snap election has offered one twist. Whilst Theresa May still appears on course for a significant majority and the 'Brexit mandate' she desires, the Labour manifesto seems to have been well received as both radical and refreshing, a thing of some substance and striking a nerve among an electorate fatigued by austerity and empty rhetoric.

Samuels' psychoanalysis of both the left and right 'post-Trump' echoes Nick Peim (2015) in making the (obvious) point that the liberal solution to inequality and poverty *wrongly* positions education as the antidote when it's function has always been to perpetuate it, but extends this to argue:

Ultimately, by producing and maintaining the failed meritocracy, neoliberal liberals end up supporting inequality and poverty, but they cannot recognize this connection because they are so invested in seeing themselves as doing good, and they reject any criticism that would shatter their idealized self-image,

Fundamentally, meritocratic narcissism is based on the desire to engage in competitive capitalism without having to feel any guilt for the losers of the system. (Samuels, 2016: 32)

John Henry Newman's 'The Idea of the University' is often cited a foundation for the kind of personalised, student-centred, comprehensive experience the contemporary educational institution is unable to provide:

"Hence it is that education is called 'Liberal'. A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom; or what in a former Discourse I have ventured to call a philosophical habit. This then I would assign as the special fruit of the education furnished at a University, as contrasted with other places of teaching or modes of teaching. This is the main purpose of a University in its treatment of its students" (Newman, 1996 [1858]: 77).

The mistake liberals (of the neo persuasion) make, for Samuels, is not only in moving away from this ideal to the discourse of the market but also in replacing the fight for workers' rights, trade

union solidarity and class activism with the illusion of the educational meritocracy. By championing 'new pedagogies', 'co-creation', 'students as partners', 'fair access', 'widening participation', 'student voice', 'global engagement', 'employability', 'graduate attributes' and all the other well intentioned manifestations of that ultimately empty signifier – the 'student experience', all from *within* the language game of the student consumer, every 'transformative' project, strategy and HEA theme is just narcissism. Rome burns.

One caveat before concluding – I refused to read the UKIP manifesto, so there may be a wealth of pledges in there to secure the media, comms and culture academic vote. That stated, whilst the Tories' mantra about inheriting the financial crisis is, at best, disingenuous, they most certainly *did* inherit the educational language game which speaks us all from New Labour (see Stephen Ball and Norman Fairclough, respectively). In shifting the rhetoric *and* facing down the law of the market, it appears the 'unelectable' Labour and Green manifestos would, if 'delivered', transform both the discourse *and* the material conditions for the 'idea of the University'.

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