

## **FABIAN SOCIETY LECTURE - RAISING THE PARTICIPATION AGE: OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL YOUNG PEOPLE**

### **Introduction**

It has been a great honour to be chair of the Fabian Society over the past 12 months - and it has been quite a year.

For the Government, a transition to a new Prime Minister.

For the Labour Party, a new leader and a deputy leadership election.

And for the Fabian Society, a chance to set the agenda for the decade ahead.

And I am pleased to say that Sunder and his team have really risen to the challenge

The Fabian Next Decade lectures set the context for the transition.

The Fabians held an excellent leadership hustings

And the Society not only held the first deputy leadership debate, it also framed the debate and set the agenda:

- on life chances and child poverty;
- on the community, identity and Britishness;
- on health and prevention;
- and in my own area of responsibility - education and young people.

And as a Government, we have also been putting Fabian ideas into practice.

Earlier this year we fulfilled one of the key recommendations of the Fabian Life Chances Commission.

We announced in the 2006 Pre-Budget Report that we will extend child benefit to the 29th week of pregnancy, helping to ensure that every child gets the best possible start in life.

And more recently, in last month's Comprehensive Spending Review, my department adopted an updated strategic objective: to narrow the gap in educational achievement.

On this, Alan Johnson and I have been working as a team:

As Secretary of State for Education and Skills, he submitted proposals to the Treasury for approval in the Spring;

And I am now taking it forward in our Children's Plan.

And the same is true in another area critical to Life Chances which I want to talk about this morning and which I also inherited from the same predecessor:

Our plan to raise the education leaving age to 18 by 2015.

Alan published a groundbreaking Green Paper in March.

We have been consulting since then.

That consultation will be brought to fruition this week as we announce historic legislation in the Queen's Speech.

And this morning, I want to set out the new rights and responsibilities for which we will legislate - and set the Bill in a wider context by spelling out what we need to do in the next few years to make this legislation a success before its provisions take effect in 2013.

### **One Hundred Years of History**

From beginning of the Fabian movement, the first Fabian campaigns were about education.

We are all proud to be part of that Fabian tradition.

But what is it about Fabians?

Is it just that Fabians are reformers?

Progressives?

Intellectuals?

Empiricists?

More likely, the defining characteristic of a Fabian is dogged persistence.

And nowhere is this more true than in our century-long campaign to extend educational opportunity and raise the education leaving age for all young people.

And some of the most lyrical passages in the very first collection of Fabian Essays from 1889 were on this theme.

Graham Wallas wrote:

*"If this generation were wise it would spend on education not only more than any other generation has spent before, but more than any generation would need to spend again.*

*It would fill the school buildings with the means not only of comfort, but of higher luxury; it would serve the associated meals on tables spread with flowers, in halls surrounded by beautiful pictures, or even as John Milton proposed, with the sound of music."*

Well, we are certainly spending more than any previous generation.

Jamie Oliver is helping us with the meals.

And we are actively working on the music with an announcement just weeks away.

Fabians were also first elected to public office in educational positions:

Annie Bessant was elected to the London School Board in 1888

Sidney Webb led the London County Council Technical Education Board for ten years from 1894.

And while many years later Tony Crossland, a committed Fabian, became best known in the education field for his antipathy to grammar schools, parity of esteem and equal opportunity for all was his passion.

As he wrote in 'the future of Socialism':

*"Perhaps the most important step... would be the raising of the school leaving age [to 16]"*

From the earliest days, the aspiration of Fabian pioneers has been to make good education universally available.

And it was this tradition that helped create the pressure for the Fisher Act of 1918.

This raised the school leaving age from 12 to 14, making full time education compulsory for all 5-14 year olds.

But remarkably, that Act also included a provision stating that all young people should participate in at least part time study until they were 18.

A bold commitment - then reneged upon in the period of austerity after the First World War, as that 1918 commitment was cut down by the Geddes Axe.

It then took 54 years, three education Acts and several government and independent reports to raise the leaving age to 16.

The Butler Act of 1944, described by ministers as an "act of faith," in the face of teacher and school shortages, raised the leaving age to 15 and "made provision" for the leaving age to rise to 16.

But this didn't happen until 1972, despite the very clear expectation in the Butler Act that the target leaving age should be sixteen, not fifteen, as soon as there were enough buildings and teachers to deliver this promise.

So it took British politicians almost another thirty years - thirty years that saw the invention of the jet engine and the microchip, and the first man on the moon - to deliver what was promised in 1944.

And now - 90 years on - we are finally legislating to fulfil that 1918 commitment and raise the education leaving age to 18.

So reform has been slow - in the face of a culture of low expectations that has held Britain back for many decades.

Looking back, it is sobering to recall that while the leaving age for pupils remained 15, under the 1944 Act, you couldn't sit GCE exams until you were 16.

So in effect, no pupil who attended a secondary modern would have been able to sit GCE exams.

In the late 40s and early 50s, this was justified by many on both sides of the political debate because it would be unfair to burden secondary modern pupils with GCE study.

Fortunately, those days are behind us.

We have made real progress in removing this historic cap on aspirations and expectations.

- secondary moderns are gone
- over 99% of young people now sit qualifications when they are sixteen
- and 60% of those young people get five or more good GCSEs.

But still, our education system is held back by two tier expectations – and what is too often seen as a first and second class distinction between academic and vocational learning.

And if you listen to some commentators and politicians, you would think that this is the natural order of things :

- Excellence for the elite
- Second best for most of the rest
- And a distant third for the minority – neither in education, work or training aged 16 and 17 whose potential is too often written off and whose needs are too often ignored

Of course, the proportion of young people not in education, training or employment is down from the 1985 high when youth unemployment climbed to record levels.

Last year, the number of 16 and 17 year olds not in education, training or employment fell by 20,000.

Three quarters of young people now stay on in education or training until they're eighteen.

Over 43% of young people now go on to study at university, compared to 39% in 1999 and around less than a third in 1997

We are a long way from the vision articulated by Lord Young in 1985, who wrote in The Times that he expected only 15% to go on to higher education.

But there is much more to do:

- in Britain today, 23% of young people have left education or training by the time they're 18;
- and at any one time around 10% of 16 and 17 year olds are not in any form of education, employment or training.

So educational opportunity for all until 18 is still not yet a reality in modern Britain.

### **Why RPA now?**

And now is the time to act.

Because there is a clear economic and a moral imperative to do so.

In today's fast changing, dynamic world, everyone needs skills to prosper.

And the days where many people could leave school at sixteen without qualifications and work their way up into a fulfilling and rewarding career are behind us.

As Sandy Leitch's report said, the demand for high level skills has increased substantially over the last 20 years and is likely to continue to do so - and our skills base is far from world class..

Leitch's projections to 2020 suggest a 50% increase in the proportion of jobs that demand high level skills.

Whereas before, the high-skilled services such as law, software programming and finance were once seen by us as "safe" from foreign competition, they can now be delivered electronically from anywhere in the world.

So more workers than ever before, from across the world, are getting the skills to compete.

Yet currently, and despite the rise in participation we have seen in recent years, we still have one of the lowest rates of staying on in education or training at 17 of any country in the developed world.

And because other countries are making fast progress, we now need to do more if we are to avoid lagging behind our international competitors.

These trends mean the divide between those with good skills and qualifications and those without is only going to increase.

And because those young people who leave education and training at 16 are disproportionately from poor families, so raising the education participation age is about social justice too.

Those who leave school early without good skills and qualifications are less likely to get a good job. Currently less than half of those with no qualifications are in work compared with nearly 90% of those with graduate level qualifications.

And those who stay in education are more likely to gain further qualifications and are likely to earn more in the future. Those who get five or more good GCSEs or the equivalent will earn around £100,000 more than those who don't.

If we don't act now to increase participation, it will be the most disadvantaged young people who will be the losers in this new and fast-changing world.

### **The Education and Skills Bill**

It was for these reasons that in 2005 we set an ambition that 90% of 17 year olds should be in education by 2015.

But I believe we need to go further.

Our ambition must be that all of our young people will continue in education or training.

That is what our Bill sets out to achieve - new rights for young people to take up opportunities for education and training, and the support they need to take up these opportunities; alongside new responsibilities for all young people - and a new partnership between young people and parents, schools and colleges, local government and employers.

History tells us that if we are to succeed in raising the participation age, it will be vital to get the legislation right.

This is why we have consulted widely since March. Today, the Schools Minister Jim Knight and I are publishing a document setting out how the legislation will work. I will not try your patience by going through all of the details.

But it is important to make clear that this is not a Bill to force young people to stay on at school or college full-time. They will be able to participate in a wide range of different ways through:

- full-time education, for example, at school or college
- work-based learning, such as an apprenticeship
- or one day a week part-time education or training, if they are employed, self-employed or volunteering more than 20 hours a week.

But the Education and Skills Bill is a bill of responsibilities as well as a bill of rights.

Because if young people fail to take up these opportunities, there will be a system of enforcement - very much a last resort - but necessary to strike the right balance between new rights and new responsibilities.

Because when we say "everyone will participate", that's what we mean.

No one will be left out on the basis that it's just not for them – or it's too hard to meet their needs.

Some will need special help. But that doesn't mean they will be exempt.

Teenage mothers will of course need the right, provision, support and childcare.

But we will apply the same kind of approach for 17 and 18 year old mums as we do for school age mothers now, where of course, they are allowed some time off learning before and after giving birth.

And local authorities will exercise the same care and discretion in relation to enforcement that they do at the moment.

And we can help with the cost of childcare through programmes such as Care to Learn.

Some young people will have special educational needs.

But it would be quite wrong to lower our sights for these young people.

As well as the legislative changes to ensure they receive good support from their local authority, we will be listening carefully and responding to the current review of Special Educational Needs provision in FE and work-based learning.

And we have requested Ofsted to review school SEN provision in 2009.

Young people in care will be able to stay in their care placement until they are 18 and receive more support to help them stay on.

Young people in custody will also receive education and training until 18.

For those whose financial circumstances mean that they might be dissuaded from full time education, we will ensure that the right support is available.

But I know too, it will take far more than a legislative change alone.

We are not going to turn round decades of low expectations simply by changing the law.

And we're not going to make the same mistake as in 1972, when there was little thought given to what young people would actually do in their extra year of schooling.

That is why we are legislating now for an obligation which will not begin until

- 2013 for 17 year olds
- 2015 for 18 year olds

This gives us six years to prepare for a reform that, if we get it right, will transform the British economy and society for the next sixty years and beyond.

Raising the participation age won't achieve our goals unless we take time to get the following four building blocks in place:

1. Curriculum and qualifications that will engage all 16-18 year olds
2. Advice and guidance that helps all young people make the right choices
3. Financial support so that no one is excluded because of cost
4. Employer engagement and the right training and apprenticeships

If we get these four things right now, then we will set ourselves on a trajectory for success in 2013.

We also need to intensify support so that long-term NEETs are offered a way back into work or education. I look forward to a time when no young person will be long-term NEET

And we have to start now to engender a broad-based culture of aspiration for all young people, their parents and the education and employment system and a balance of rights and responsibilities to make our higher compulsory leaving age effective.

That is our challenge for the years ahead.

I will take each in turn.

### **Curriculum and qualifications**

The first building block is making sure that there is the right learning opportunity for every young person.

We need a system where:

- no matter what level a young person is at, there are suitable opportunities;
- no matter what style of learning most appeals to a young person – whether general, subject-based learning, training for a job or a broader mix of theory and practice – there are courses available; and
- no matter where the young person is in the country, those opportunities are there as an entitlement.

First, for all those who need level 1 or entry level provision, a new 'Foundation Learning Tier' - a coherent body of qualifications which will set out clear progression routes for young people who need a new start.

Second, within every qualification, a new emphasis on functional skills in English, maths and ICT.

Third, reforms to GCSEs and A levels, with more challenging questions at A level, less coursework at GCSE - and a new extended project for A level students, so that they have better opportunities to learn and research independently.

And fourth – and crucially – the new Diplomas.

Available at 3 levels – Foundation, Higher and Advanced.

Designed to mix the best of theoretical and practical learning.

All including a requirement to achieve the functional skills and to complete an extended project, but also 'personal, learning and thinking skills'-, working with others, learning independently, solving problems creatively, which employers and universities consistently say they want.

The first 5 available from next September – in 100 local authorities.

The next 5 the following year, and four after that – with the first 14 becoming an entitlement for all young people nationally by 2013.

Mixing real educational rigour with a work-related experience. Engaging a wider group of young people and stretching the most able.

And now, because we are confident in progress to date, and in the support Diplomas are winning, we are adding three new ones – in humanities, languages and science. To bring the benefits of Diplomas to a further group of young people who are not ready to choose a sector of the economy in which to focus.

This is a once-in-a-generation chance to break out of the old two tier divide where academic qualifications were seen as 'excellent' and vocational learning was second class –

And with the support of universities and employers, I believe Diplomas can bridge this divide by combining the theoretical and the practical, and could become the qualification of choice over the next decade.

And to those who oppose our reforms, who attack our new Diplomas on the grounds that "excellence" can only ever be delivered for the few, I say not only is this out of touch with the demands of big employers and universities, it is a backward-looking view, which would entrench forever the old division between vocational and academic learning.

It is this old and out-dated belief that excellence can only be for the few and not the many which has held our economy back for too long.

I say to the Opposition: reject this vision of a two-tier Britain, support our Diplomas and our educational reforms and back our Bill and our vision to provide education or training for every young person until their 18th birthday – let us not hold young people back from reaching their full potential, and hold our whole country back from what we can achieve together.

### **Advice and guidance**

The second building block is advice and guidance - so that young people know and understand what is out there, and can be confident that they can make choices that will work for them.

First, this means local authorities taking clear responsibility for advice and guidance as part of the integrated support they offer to young people – making sure that youth services, Connexions and others who provide personal support to young people come together in a coherent way.

Second, clear new national standards for advice and guidance.

Last week my colleague Beverley Hughes set out clearly what we expect of local authorities as they take responsibility for the services provided by Connexions.

Third, a new local area prospectus available online, already available from this September in every area - setting out the full range of opportunities available, so that young people can see the choices available to them clearly in one place.

This has the potential to become the basis for a UCAS-style common application system in every area.

But we also need to ensure that young people can make a good transition into those choices – so that they make a good start to learning and stay on their course and achieve well.

This year the September Guarantee ensured that each young person had the offer of a place on a suitable course from the September after their GCSE year.

We will now extend this to 17 year olds.

In addition we want to see more transition mentors – who already in many areas support a young person from year 11 in one institution, as they make choices, to post-16 learning in a separate institution, as they start a new course.

### **Financial support**

The third building block is enhanced financial support to overcome the cost barriers which can prevent young people from participating.

The Education Maintenance Allowance has been a major success in breaking down the barriers that may stand in the way of young people staying on.

A weekly payment to those in most need – of up to £30 – and bonuses to be earned for staying in learning and progressing, designed to make sure that every route is affordable – so that no young person is barred by cost from pursuing the route that will work best for them.

EMAs are about rights and responsibilities - and their incentives have encouraged good attendance too – with payments withdrawn for poor attendance.

Now we want to move to incentivise effort as well – so that payments reward young people not only for good attendance but are linked to good behaviour and hard work too.

And as we strengthen the incentives, we are now moving to strengthen EMA further.

We are trialling an extension of EMA, so that there will be more financial support available for young people - particularly the hard to reach.

And because Entry to Employment programmes are so crucial in providing access to post-16 education and training for some of the most vulnerable learners, I can announce today that every learner pursuing an Entry 2 Employment (E2E) programme will get an EMA.

And we will continue to build on that foundation of EMA to extend financial support to all those in need.

For example: our Care to Learn scheme pays for childcare so that young mothers can participate in post-16 education and training - as they will be required to do under our new legislation from 2013.

### **Employer engagement**

The fourth building block is engaging employers to help us ensure worthwhile learning opportunities for young people who want to start work at 16.

We recognise that lots of young people will not want to stay at school or college, and that they can gain really valuable skills and experience through employment.

But we think they should be continuing in training or education as well.

Around 50,000 young people aged 16 and 17 are currently in full time jobs without training.

In preparation for 2013 and the requirement for all young people to be learning, we need to work with employers and learning providers to reduce this number.

Apprenticeships are the best route for young people who want to go into employment at 16 and continue their learning through work.

As well as the occupationally specific skills for their job, Apprenticeships ensure young people get the essential basic skills and the wider technical knowledge they need for their chosen career.

We have doubled the number of Apprenticeships since 1997, from a total of 75,000 then to 150,000 for 16-18 year olds now.

And we have announced that from 2013, there will be an entitlement to an Apprenticeship place for every young person who wants to continue their learning on a work-based route and meet the entry requirements.

We must create a further 90,000 Apprenticeship places by 2013 – and together we will.

We are working to create new Apprenticeships in sectors where they do not currently exist. And we need to ensure there are more public sector Apprenticeships too.

Other employers are already providing high quality training to their employees. Some of this is accredited but in many cases it isn't, so the learning young people are doing at work isn't being recognised and doesn't enable them to demonstrate their achievements.

I know that not all employers will want or be able to provide Apprenticeships or other accredited training.

That's OK - we will not force them to do so.

However, in this case, they should enable their 16 and 17 year olds to attend training elsewhere.

These young people already have a right to time off for training if they haven't already got a level 2 qualification – it has been very little used but we should work together to ensure more young people exercise this right.

And through Learning Agreement pilots in 8 areas, we are currently testing different ways of motivating young people in jobs without training to take up learning opportunities, and different incentives for their employers.

We will learn from the experience of these pilot areas to reduce the numbers of young people in jobs without training before 2013.

### **Targeted support and NEETS**

There are those who will say that even with these four building blocks in place, we are doomed to fail because there are young people who simply refuse to engage or aren't capable of achieving anything.

I reject this view, just as we should reject any view that places a cap on the aspirations of young people.

The fact is that there are too many young people who are being failed by the current system. This is why we are launching a new strategy on NEETs today, which I have set before Parliament this morning.

This will bring new resources and effort behind this priority issue.

Many young people spend only a short period of time out of education, training or employment.

And for these people our focus must be to help them get back on track as quickly as possible.

But we need to intensify our support to get young people who are long-term NEET into work or education.

And balance these new rights with new responsibilities.

That way we can look forward confidently to a time when no young person will be long-term NEET.

Over the last year we have been putting in place a new strategy to tackle the NEET problem:

First: careful tracking, so that we identify early those who are NEET or in danger of becoming so.

Second: personalised guidance and support, to make sure that young people know what their options are and are supported over the barriers they may face.

Third: the provision of a full range of courses to meet each young person's needs.

Putting all of this in place now will be essential to our aims for 2013 and 2015.

But now we will go further, extending new rights and responsibilities.

I have already mentioned how we will improve financial support through EMAs for all those doing E2E. We will also ensure EMAs strongly incentivise the behaviour we want - attendance, behaviour and achievement.

In addition, we will also continue our work on Activity Agreements which offer personalised learning, linked to financial support, to help the hardest to reach young people. We will look at the evaluation evidence from the Activity Agreement pilots in considering a national approach to tackling NEET in the run-up to raising the participation age.

And crucially, we will go further in extending responsibility to young people themselves. We will extend early entry to the New Deal to all young people who reach their 18th birthday having already been NEET for a total of six months in the previous two years.

At present, someone who has been long term NEET on their 18th birthday becomes eligible for Job Seekers Allowance.

But they do not enter the New Deal for another 6 months.

The change that I am announcing today will mean that the New Deal rights and responsibilities regime will apply to those who have been long term NEET as soon as they turn 18 years old.

And this in turn will improve the incentives for 16 and 17 year olds before they reach this point.

These actions will reduce NEET now and over the coming years.

So that by the time we reach 2013 our aim is that no young people will be long-term NEET, even before we make it a requirement that all should participate.

### **A culture of aspiration for all**

Of course, the foundation for all of this must be a new culture of learning and aspiration - with high expectations for every young person.

And here is the huge extra potential of the legislation - to accelerate change:

- galvanising the system so that every single young person can participate successfully;
- and communicating to every young person the benefits and advantages that will come from learning and succeeding.

Think what this means for today's year 6 pupils - who will be the first to be directly affected by the new legislation in 2013.

Those young people are 10 today - they will make the transition to secondary school next September.

At the start of secondary school, this will be the first group of young people to experience the new secondary curriculum, with schools tailoring learning to the needs of the individual.

From 2011, this group of young people will start Key Stage 4.

This will be first year in which all the Diplomas will be on offer.

The Foundation Learning Tier will be available nationally.

GCSEs – in English, maths and science will include functional skills.

So, young people will benefit from a new Key Stage 4 and a new range of qualifications.

All of them ensuring the basics that they will need for progression in learning and life.

And a more engaging Key Stage 4 opportunities to sample the full range of choices available post-16.

And in 2013 – this group will reach 16.

They will be the first generation required to carry on learning.

But they will have new entitlements to a new range of routes.

Any one of the 17 Diplomas available at whatever level is appropriate.

An Apprenticeship entitlement for all those qualified to do one.

And a new pre-Apprenticeship route for those not yet qualified, which will prepare them to take an Apprenticeship.

The guidance and support that they need.

Financial support in place.

Employers more involved than ever.

And targeted support for those needing extra help.

## **Conclusion**

I believe this radical reform is essential for the future of our country.

Only if all our young people are engaged with learning, stay on in education or training to 18 and develop the skills that will enable them to succeed in life will we prosper together in a changing world economy.

So I believe we are now at a historic moment - the chance to fulfil the vision of that 1918 Fisher Act.

Our legislation to raise the education leaving age to eighteen will complete a century of struggle to promote educational opportunity for all.

A radical reform based squarely in the Fabian progressive tradition.

Achieved, at last, through Fabian dogged persistence.

And delivered in this generation by a Labour government.

Thank-you.

