

POLICY WATCH

2008/5

17 January 2008

Views come in from all sides as MPs discuss raising the learning age

The Bill to provide for young people to stay on in some form of learning or training until 18 reached the Second Reading stage in the House of Commons last week. It's a key plank in Gordon Brown's education and skills policy but it still divides camps. The Conservatives say the aspiration is right but the compulsion is "regressive;" the Lib - Dems say 'it's badly thought out' and they will vote against it. But the sharpest criticism has come in the form of a recent Paper from a leading academic. *"This is a badly conceived policy. It will not help our most marginalised young people. Instead it is likely to further disadvantage them,"* concluded Alison Woolf in her Paper for the 'think group' Policy Exchange

"In one sense, we must ignore the Alison Woolf arguments" urged the Chairman of the DCSF Select Committee, Barry Sheerman, when he stood up to speak in the debate. But it might not be that simple, for she has exposed what she claims to be significant flaws in the economic case behind this policy. The Government had claimed, for instance, that the potential economic benefits of 'compelling' young people to continue in some form of learning and training until at age 18 would be £2.4bn per cohort. Alison Woolf suggests that there are more likely to be *"losses of £1.7bn per cohort."*

It all depends on how you add it up of course but along with Frank Field's Paper on NEETs last summer and the Prince's Trust 'Counting the Cost of Youth Disadvantage' Report before that, this latest Paper continues to highlight two running sores in what the Secretary of State claimed *"was the biggest reform in educational participation for more than 50 years."*

First coercion. *"A policy of coercing young people into continued participation is at odds with everything we know about the links between motivation and learning"* the Paper argues. Alison Woolf cites three reasons why coercion won't work. First because *"anyone who knows anything about learning knows that human beings do not learn unless they are motivated to do so."* It was a point Frank Field made in a different way when he argued that 'disengaged' young people, rather than being dragooned into staying on, should leave at age 14 and helped into getting a job. As one MP colourfully put it, *"is not the crux of the matter the fact that the Government do not understand that people can learn an awful lot in the workplace? I probably learned more in my time working at Asda than I learned on my degree course at University."* Second because what young people are being offered in terms of qualifications will do little to improve their prospects and they know that. Returning to a familiar theme about the relative economic returns to qualifications, she argued that Apprenticeships are 'valued,' as are "good" GCSEs and GCEs but the two vocational qualifications *"which have clear labour market benefits are BTEC and RSA awards,"* neither of which has been advocated in the proposed qualification offer. And third because *"large numbers of forced participants will have a strong negative effect on the environment in which others*

are trying to study and train.” In other words conscription will block places and hinder those intent on trying to learn.

The issue of coercion was raised by Michael Gove, who led for the Opposition in the debate; *“we increasingly recognise that at the age of 16 an individual has the maturity to exercise appropriate autonomy over his or her own destiny. We must therefore have compelling reasons for restricting that individual autonomy.”* The *“compelling reason”* put up by Ed Balls in response was that *“it is only by requiring that every young person participates in education or training until the age of 18 that we can ensure that they all have the opportunities they need and that all employers, schools and colleges are galvanised to play their part so that no young person falls through the cracks.”*

Sanctions of course remain a weapon of last resort and we should not perhaps become obsessed by something that might rarely happen but at heart is an important principle that divides the Parties: the Government believes it has a duty to look after the interests of young people even if this means extending state interference, the Opposition believe Government should row back from interfering in people’s lives and let young people decide for themselves. At stake perhaps is what is a young person? To Barry Sheerman, it was clear; *“Every Child Matters and the outcomes of that should apply until they are 18.”* The more radical option put forward by Alison Woolf was that young people should be provided with an entitlement to two years’ full - time education or training but that this should be taken up when the individual chooses rather than when the state does. She argued that the adoption of the unique learner number made this option feasible.

The second issue exposed by Alison Woolf was the impact on the youth labour market. *“As a result of the legislation, many small firms are likely to stop employing any 16 and 17 year olds. This will have a devastating effect on the youth labour market and on the skills and future employability of many young people.”* This issue was equally vigorously jumped on by the Opposition. *“One of our key concerns,”* argued Michael Gove, *“is that the Bill may price 16 and 17 year olds out of the marketplace as a result of the costs of compliance, because every firm that hires them will have to monitor where they are when they go to college and find a replacement for them during the 20% of the working week when they are not there.”*

There seem to be two points to make here. First, and obvious, to recognise that there are many different types of employer. While larger companies may be able to absorb the costs, the smaller ones may not and according to Alison Woolf, 55% of 16 and 17 year olds work in a workplace that has less than 25 employees. It’s a clear case where size matters. Second, that as Alison Woolf pointed out, the Government has become fixated by qualifications; counting up the numbers who have achieved a level 2 may be helpful for auditing purposes but reflects *“a profound misunderstanding of how the labour market works.”* *“What really breaks the cycle of unemployment and deprivation is getting a first step on the job ladder not acquiring qualifications of negligible or zero value.”*

The Government may not thank Alison Woolf for her contribution but it has opened up an important area of debate. The last word surely though should go to the MP who quoted from a televised interview with a local millionaire in his constituency. *“Did you find leaving school at 16 held you back?”* *“Yes, love. I had a job at 12 and had to wait 4 more years before I could start!”*

Edexcel Policy Watches are intended to help colleagues keep up to date with national developments. Information is correct at the time of writing and is offered in good faith. No liability is accepted for decisions made on the basis of information given.