

**SPEECH BY RT HON DAVID MILIBAND MP
REDLAND GREEN SCHOOL, BRISTOL
30 JUNE 2010**

There are not many benefits to being in Opposition. But one of them is that you have enforced time to reflect, to listen, to plan not just for the short term but for the years ahead. An Opposition must expose and oppose, vigorously, where it is appropriate to do so; and there will be plenty of that if the Government carry through the ideas set out a week ago in the Budget.

But Labour will in due course need to propose. As a prelude to that we need to lead discussion of the great challenges that face the country in the next decade.

Today I want to start with the issue that is most important to me: education, its purpose, its focus, its principles. I say most important, because after the accident of birth, over which government has no say, education is the most powerful way in which life chances are shaped, and it is an area over which Government has greatest power. I know this from my own education – at two primary schools, three comprehensives (one in the USA), and two universities in Britain and America. And I know it from my own constituency, whose schools and teachers are a vital inspiration for my optimism about educational change.

Today I want to reflect on where we stand in the great project of educational transformation – from what the new Prime Minister defends as the “brazenly elitist” vision of the highest quality education for the lucky few to what I would define as the “brazenly aspirational” goal of an education system that brings out talents, of a wide array of kinds, in all children. You could call it a genuinely comprehensive education – in terms of who it serves and how it serves them.

My vision is of a society where children of all family backgrounds do get equal opportunities; but it has to be more than that. I want more than the opportunity to be unequal, more than a fair race to be the next Stephen Hawking. I am with Yeats: ‘Education is not the filling of the pail but the lighting of a fire,’ a fire of confidence and inquiry that needs to sweep across society with ever greater intensity, and is reflected in higher standards across the board. Far from watering down our aspirations, I think we should be scaling them up – in schools, colleges and in higher education

This school is a fantastic example of what is possible. Redland Green has new buildings, extra teachers, new opportunities for education within and beyond the classroom. A Sixth Form learning community for North Bristol, not just students in this school, is already delivering results. Claremont Special School is co-located onsite, providing real opportunities for integration of children with special needs.

This school reflects parent power and community interest. Without them, it would not exist. I should know – since as Schools Minister I supported this school, meeting the absolutely legitimate demands of the local community for extra local provision and higher standards.

Standards

There are massive issues about inequality outside the education system that need proper discussion. But today I want to focus inside the system. Education involves some dry technical issues about school organisation and pupil assessment, on which reasonable people can disagree, but it is also about a deep question of ethics and philosophy. Do we really believe in the equal worth of all? Do we really believe that everyone has a talent and a right to develop it? And that by developing the talent of all that we become a fair, just, and prosperous society?

I reject utterly and absolutely the deadening philosophy that says “more means worse”, which defies the evidence that every time more was provided, it didn’t; that insists the only way to explain improved exam grades is to allege dumbed down tests; that asserts that when more people go into higher education it drags down standards.

It is instead to assert that all succeed not when all get the same grade in identical subjects but insist instead that we can raise floor level of achievement – for all – much higher than we have previously been willing to accept, in the basics and across a wider range of subjects and aptitudes, but that we can also raise the ceilings on achievement. Countries like Finland and Singapore, with very different social and political traditions, show the way. We should be looking out to the new global ‘gold standard’, not back to the old gold standard of the past.

At our best we are world class. England is well above average compared to our competitor nations in English at the end of primary school and Maths in years 6 and 9. We are just off the top of the table in Science in year 9. In education, as in health, 13 years of Labour government brought Britain back into the European mainstream. 41,000 more teachers, 120,000 more teaching assistants, every school a specialist school to drive up quality, the number of seriously underperforming secondary schools cut dramatically from 1600 to 260, staying-on rates improved at 16, and far more young people going on to university and further education.

Investment was significant and sustained, including over £6 billion a year invested in buildings, but so was reform – in respect of new ways of working, bringing in new practices and providers, tackling chronic failure, promoting strong leadership. And the poorest schools with the poorest children showed the fastest improvement.

For all that, there is still a hill to climb. The international study of 15 year olds finds English pupils average in core subjects. About half of all pupils do not get 5 good GCSEs including English and Maths. And despite progress, the link between outcomes and background persists; around only a quarter of pupils eligible for free school meals achieve 5 A*-Cs with English and Maths.

New Government

The new Government say they understand this. They say they want to be tested against the yardstick of tackling the underperformance of poor children. Good.

They have said their priorities are freedom for excellent schools and the creation of new schools.

My view is that we should be encouraging our best schools to be leading innovation as part of the system not separate from it. The legislation for Trust Schools, with new freedoms and flexibilities, did that. We have developed outstanding examples of what the best schools can do, leading federations, pioneering a better and broader curriculum including education beyond the classroom, and cooperating with primary schools. You don't need to rebadge a successful school as an Academy to be leading innovation in the system.

In fact, it's quite confusing to do so, because our Academies programme has been aimed at transfusion of new culture, structure and standards in the toughest schools. It is a model for a purpose. It has established hundreds of excellent new and replacement secondary schools in less advantaged areas, sponsored by first-rate school managers, universities and social entrepreneurs, all working in partnership with outstanding headteachers. Here in Bristol, the City Academy sponsored by the University of the West of England and John Lacock, the former chairman of Bristol City, led by Ray Priest, an outstanding headteacher, is a good example.

The Government Academies Bill has a different purpose - to extend the academy model to existing successful schools. Recent analysis by Ofsted shows these schools teach 40 per cent fewer poor pupils than the national average; the existing Academies have nearly three times as many. I note with particular concern that despite the coalition's rhetoric

of fairness, Michael Gove won't even agree to put in the Academies Bill provisions which would require funding to be fair between different categories of school, or which would require successful new Academies to support less successful schools. This needs to be a matter of law not grace and favour.

And in truth we must address the huge issue not prioritised in the current government programme, namely how to promote achievement by the two thirds of schools - and pupils - who constitute the middle of the achievement range.

There are a mass of policy issues that I would like to see debated:

- how primary schools can be supported to spot and meet special needs earlier
- whether small secondary schools don't provide a way to bring education to the human scale
- whether we would be better off with a five term year which made for consistent length holidays and avoided the dip over the summer
- how pay systems can reward teachers in the toughest schools
- whether the National College has cracked the supply, preparation and support for top quality head teachers, and prepared us for the big retirement bulge
- and what we can do about the one inequality that is most challenging of all, the vast inequality between the world of the literate and engaged and those who cannot read, write or communicate well.

But today I want to talk about three issues that really stir my heart.

First, teachers, because I remember how much difference Mrs Bland, Mr Pieniazek, Mr Hoban, Mrs Clark, Mr Page Jones and Mr Burkitt made to me. The memory of their skill and commitment makes me want to see more people benefit from their kind of professionalism.

Second, the curriculum, because I wish my A level experience had been more balanced. I wish I could have done the International Baccalaureat.

And third, universities, because mine made so much difference to me, and I want more young people, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, to get the benefits of a university education. It's a sign we just don't get it that we are even debating whether to keep the 50 per

cent target for 18-30 year old participation; over the next 15 years the leading economies of the world are going to head for 60 per cent and we should too. The idea that other countries have enough students able to benefit from higher education, but we don't, is just insulting. In truth, this needs to be the first plank of a serious economic growth strategy for the future.

My theme is simple. How to build world class experience, not just for some, but for all.

Teaching

First, teaching. No school is better than its teachers. No nation has better schools than it has teachers. The dedication to learning and commitment to public service of our teachers is an inspiration for me as a politician and a parent – and has to be the foundation of policy.

The quality of teaching has improved greatly over the past decade and according to Ofsted we now have the best cohort of teachers ever. But we cannot rest on our laurels.

In South Korea teachers are drawn from the top 5 per cent of graduates. In Finland they are drawn from the top 10 per cent. In Hong Kong and Singapore from the top thirty per cent. In the US teachers are recruited from the bottom third of high school students going to College, though 11 per cent of all Ivy League graduates apply to teach through Teach for America, whose British equivalent, Teach First, was set up in Labour's first term.

In England we sit midway in between. The Graduate Teacher Programme and Teach First have brought thousands of talented people into the profession, and significantly helped schools in challenging circumstances to gain a supply of outstanding new teachers in recent years. We need more – for example trying to get three quarters of teachers from the top quarter of graduate, retaining as well as attracting the best into the profession. Here are three areas that interest me.

Labour set a goal that all teachers should over time gain masters qualifications, as in Finland, with a large element of new practical learning as part of their course. I wonder if the Advanced Skills Teacher programme can't be directed to the toughest schools so that the most innovative teachers in the country are delivering outstanding lessons to those who need it most.

Professionalism does not just mean less red tape. It requires proper support, including enough teaching assistants to take on responsibilities which otherwise teachers have to assume at the expense of teaching. No reform of the past 13 years has done more to free up teachers to

teach than the introduction of teaching assistants in large numbers across our schools. It has also transformed the support schools are able to give to pupils, and helped the best schools to become 12 hour a day institutions offering after-school programmes and study support. It would be a tragedy to lose this.

We must also make sure accountability is not the enemy of professionalism but its ally. The best systems are now looking at how teachers can mentor and rate each other. Self-critical peer-to-peer teacher networks building strength in every school are at the heart of professionalism.

If the engine of quality is teaching, the enemy of high standards is boredom of pupils. I think this is particularly important in secondary education.

Curriculum and Testing

My views on the need to modernise curriculum and testing are hardly a secret. When I was at the IPPR over 15 years ago I wrote a paper on the case for a British Baccalaureate. As Minister for Schools I set up the Tomlinson enquiry. But 15 years on the 14-19 scene is if anything more complex.

One of my greatest frustrations as a Minister was being moved from the DFES three weeks before the Tomlinson report was published. The vision of a unified system of academic and vocational study, in which all students aimed to graduate from school or college at 18 with a broad and balanced range of achievements under their belt, from subject knowledge to critical thinking skills, is as strong as ever. It was one area, sadly, where Tony Blair was not the moderniser.

The arguments haven't changed, and they have become stronger over time. Our highest achievers generally specialise too early and too narrowly. Far earlier and far more narrowly than in virtually any developed country in the world. Even with the new diplomas, opportunities for those not on the conventional A-level track are too constrained, and progression rates and routes too weak.

There is too much time spent in exams and revising for exams, not enough time in learning. The obstacle course of GCSE exams, AS exams and then A level exams really is over-testing of a deadening variety. If everyone is staying in education to 18, then why are we spending so much time doing exams in years 11 and 12 the results of which will fade into history once year 13 achievement is recorded? The cost of the exams, some £660m in 2009, is reason enough to look at this area. But the National Education Trust says that by the end of year 13 students will have spent the equivalent of a whole academic year being

examined. Your headteacher here suggests 60 out of 380 teaching days are lost in this way.

We need in my view a mature debate about whether externally marked GCSEs outside the basics of English, maths and science, are right for the 21st century, or whether in fact they are a residue of the idea that 16 year olds should be taking a “school leaving” exam.

We need to address how we can make AS levels an experience of breadth, diversity and discovery not another step on the exam treadmill.

And we need to figure out how to ensure 18 year olds leave school or college with a qualification that encourages breadth of skill as well as depth of knowledge.

For example, we need to look at how we promote team building and problem solving systematically within the curriculum and assessment system. At how we develop the social and emotional skills which young people need to become effective parents and citizens. At how we nurture the creative skills which are such a vital part of individual talent and so essential also to supplying the creative companies and industries which are among Britain’s strongest competitive advantages in today’s global markets.

Of course more students would benefit from knowing more about Churchill as Michael Gove wants – including that he was a distinguished Chancellor of Bristol University. But our Chinese or Indian competitors won’t be scared if that is how we define success in the education system.

Higher Education

Third, higher education. Bizarrely, HE is under attack from the new coalition government. I believe the debate about HE belongs at the heart of the education debate – because more school students are showing determination to attend, and the Government’s early moves in this area have been deeply disturbing.

Higher education looks set to have to find 25 per cent real-term cuts over the next four years. The government has already cut 10,000 student places, breaking the deal made at the time fees were introduced: that students, when they graduate and earn a decent income but not before, would pay more of the cost of their higher education, but in return the state would continue to invest in maintaining high quality education provide more properly funded places for suitably qualified young people to study in the first place. Why should students pay more for less? And why should parents at large buy into this when there is a good chance

that their own children, who have got their A-levels and want to get on in life – remember, student applications are up a dramatic 22 per cent this year alone – are denied the chance?

Vince Cable has criticised the 50 per cent participation goal for under 30 year-olds, when in fact this level of participation is already achieved by some of the most of the dynamic economies in the world, including Finland, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, many of which are aiming to go higher still.

In the United States President Obama has pledged that by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of University graduates in the world. That would mean surpassing the top country, South Korea, which currently has 53% in Higher Education. We have 45%.

So let me set out my position. We need every young person to leave secondary school or college or work based learning with a good set of qualifications that give them the skills and qualifications to succeed. And we need as many as possible to continue in learning after that – in apprenticeships, higher level vocational course and, yes, higher education.

We need to defend the quality and quantity of the offer we make to young people. The universities of the future will not be replicas of universities of today. They will need to be confident in their diversity and offer an experience which is suited to the very different needs of a wide range of students and employers – for example more opportunities for distance learning, be more flexible, more IT enabled, with high quality vocational provision. But universities need to be at the heart of our future, not at the margins. That is why I deplore cuts to student numbers and strongly defend the 50 per cent target.

But I would go further. Over the next 15 years we are going to have to revise up our participation rate not down if we want to be an innovation economy in 2025 with the ability to sustain our living standards.

This is not a matter of “the more the merrier” and cannot mean more of the same. It is about a strategic choice as a country for the kind of economy we want to be, and the kind of higher education system we want to develop. For example, it means going beyond the striking statistics about how much difference a degree makes to the average wage, to economic growth rates and return to the state, in favour of a careful look whether we are producing enough graduates in the sciences, for which we might need stronger incentives for study in the high cost courses like Physics and Chemistry. It also means carefully considering the balance of three year and two year degrees.

But the overall direction should be clear. It is quite easy to see how 60 per cent HE participation rates for 18-30 year olds will become the norm for the world's most productive economies, and Britain will need to be up there.

This expansion must not come at the expense of quality. Many of our universities are genuinely world class and we must preserve that. It does mean that graduates, not students, will need to contribute more. There are a number of ways of achieving that, such as reforms to the student loan system or variations on a graduate contribution scheme. But the principles are clear: cost must not deter access and contributions must be based on ability to pay. The current system has some problems but it is one of the most generous in the world and I am pleased that more students from poorer families should be going to university.

We need to think far more creatively about how we open doors to those with the aptitude to make the most of new opportunities. Thirty per cent more students from the poorest families are going to university than were five years ago, and the expansion in higher education over the last few decades has overwhelmingly benefited young people from the best comprehensives. That's good, but it's not enough. Michael Gove likes to say it is a scandal that just 45 pupils eligible for free school meals went to Oxbridge last year, compared to 175 from Eton. He's right, but the question is what we do about it.

Some of that inequality can only be addressed outside the schooling system. I am thinking, for example, of the terrifying statistics about the differences in children's vocabulary and learning by the age of 5. That deserves a speech of its own.

We do need to address the quality of teaching, learning and support in the state sector. I like the model of universities partnering with tough schools. Private schools too should be asked to sponsor Academies and raise achievement to fulfil charitable obligations.

But we also need to address entry to university. In the US aptitude tests are used as part of University admissions so students' future potential as well as their current achievement is measured. In Texas all students in the top 10% of relative performance in their school gain automatic admittance to the Texas University of their choice. These are ideas we should be exploring not to reduce the quality of entrants but to raise them.

Some universities run special schemes which provide alternative entry routes to leading universities for students who do not have conventional qualifications. Universities like Leeds and King's build a relationship with schools in their areas who don't send many students to their universities to help them identify the bright but underprivileged students who – largely due to the challenging circumstances of their home or school life

– haven't managed to achieve the standard A levels. These students are then given lots of support and guidance for a whole additional year to prepare them and make sure they are equipped with the right skills and knowledge to join fellow students on their course. The results are very promising. Most of the under-privileged students who were given the extra preparatory year go on to do just as well as the students who came in with traditional A levels. We need to think about building on schemes like these across the country so no students capable of benefitting from higher education are left behind because they missed opportunities to gain the right qualifications at school.

Conclusion

So education reform is an ongoing imperative. Brilliant teachers inspiring a love of learning. An exciting and stretching curriculum, underpinned by relevant qualifications. World class universities opening their door of opportunity to more young people. They would be the building blocks of my education policy as leader of the Labour Party.

The two golden tests for policy are simple: do they raise standards and do they narrow the social class achievement gap?

I feel passionately about these goals because I was brought up to believe they are achievable. Both my parents were teachers. Fundamental to my upbringing was the idea that there is so much we do not know, but so much reason to try and find out. That is the optimistic spirit of enquiry that needs to drive our education system.