

Tristram Hunt Speech to Annual Conference

INTRODUCTION

It is a great pleasure to be in Birmingham this morning.

A city that has always valued education, skills, technology, enterprise and industry.

In 1785 the historian William Hutton predicted the city's future prosperity. 'Her growth will be amazing, her expansion rapid, perhaps not to be paralleled in history. We shall see her rise in all the beauty of youth, of grace, of elegance, and attract the notice of the commercial world.'

And that was without seeing the Mailbox...

But this is also a young city.

And one of the great perks of my job is being able to escape Westminster and meet the next generation face to face.

And I am never anything less than impressed by their boundless energy and optimism.

I saw it when I met the young women studying hospitality and travel at Dudley College, knowing exactly what they wanted to achieve from their course and where they wanted to go with their lives.

At Priestley Sixth Form College in Warrington, talking to students using GPS technology for their archaeology A Levels.

At South Essex College, learning what young plumbers, theatre designers, and electrical engineers wanted out of their courses.

The story is encouragingly universal: young people bursting with ideas about how they contribute and make a difference.

So whilst the purpose of my speech today is to spell out the choice voters will face at the 2015 General Election.

Yet I also want to make it clear that this is about far more than the nuts and bolts of education reform.

It is about listening to our young people, understanding who they are, and backing them to succeed as a generation that can change this country for the better.

AN ECONOMY THAT WORKS FOR ALL

Now like many young people I too believe we should be supremely optimistic about the future.

In fact, I believe that the digital innovation could genuinely herald an era where the positive freedom individuals truly require to shape their destiny may finally be extended to the many.

Nevertheless, we cannot shy away from the fact that this new era will be one of transformative social change.

And with that will also come profound economic upheaval.

Indeed, according to one particularly gloomy Oxford University analysis this 'third industrial revolution' could see 35% of existing British jobs lost to technological progress in the next two decades.

Economic strength in the 21st century will be defined less and less by territorial endowments, natural resources or the sheer size of a nation's labour force; and more and more by the quality of its human capital.

Which means there are compelling social justice reasons to focus on growing our skills base.

Because we in the Labour Party know that when there is an employment crisis it is the vulnerable, disadvantaged and low skilled members of our society who are so often hit the hardest.

That is why Ed Miliband's 'race to the top' strategy - a high wage, hi-tech, high-innovation economy that works for all - is less a choice and more the only credible game in town.

VOCATIONAL VISION

Central to this vision is transforming outcomes and boosting achievement in vocational education.

Now, whilst I would argue to the hilt that the last Labour Government left lasting improvements upon English education, it is also fair to say that raising school standards and expanding access to higher education absorbed most of our reforming energy.

So it is now time to show the same resolve and rigour with regards to what he has called the 'Forgotten 50 per cent' of youngsters who do not go onto to study at University.

Because the truth is that young people who want to pursue an excellent vocational education face a bewildering array of options that are difficult to navigate and often fail to offer progression to good jobs or further study.

Moreover, according to the Wolf report, only 4% of the average cohort achieve a decent level 2 pass in English and Maths between 16-18, which, given the sizeable numbers who fail to achieve this at GCSE, provides serious cause for concern.

The long tail of underperformance between 16-19 and the lack of an aspirational technical route are the historic twin failings of the English education system and you can trace them as far back as Rab Butler's stillborn Technical Schools 70 years ago.

Yet whilst the economic cost of such poor standards is enormous, it is the social cost in terms of poor health, low self-esteem, weak employment prospect, stunted life chances that is truly staggering.

What is more, we need to train over 80,000 technicians a year for the next four years due to retirements and we face a 820,000 STEM skills gap by 2020.

So my first priority as Education Secretary will be to work alongside my colleague Chuka Umunna to deliver a joint DfE / BIS White Paper on reforms to further education, apprenticeships, and vocational qualifications.

We are beginning work on it now and will look to publish in the first 100 days of the next Labour Government.

AS/A LEVELS.

However, first I want to address another fundamental issue of opportunity, rigour and broadened horizons.

Misguided policy-making.

Politically timed announcements with little or no consideration of classroom impact.

A wilful refusal to listen to the evidence.

And an administrative incompetence that borders on negligence...

...the decoupling of A and AS levels is an issue which combines all attributes we have come to expect of this government when it comes to education reform.

What is more, there can be little doubt that the uncertainty parents, pupils and teachers are faced with on this issue is the biggest real-time issue facing secondary education.

Pupils are deciding now what qualifications they will be studying next September.

180,000 of whom will be studying in FE and sixth form colleges.

And the government is simply failing to do its duty properly to inform pupils about the choices open to them and to prepare schools and colleges for the different scenarios following the general election in May.

Make no mistake: the Labour Party believes the decision to scrap AS levels as a staging post to A levels narrows opportunities and, as Cambridge University has argued, will be bad for social mobility.

This is a policy with the almost unique and baffling combination of being both bad for access and excellence.

Universities value the AS Level as a good indication of future potential.

Students value the examination as a good indication of their level.

Schools value it as a spur to action.

And as a report by the London School of Economics has found, removing AS levels could mean "1 in 5 students capable of getting a good degree at the institution of their choice might not be given that chance."

So my message is clear: Labour will not pursue the government's policy of scrapping AS Level qualifications as a staging post to full A Level qualifications.

We will make sure your opportunities are kept open so that you can progress with your studies, safe in the knowledge that you can decide, in year, which subjects you want to pursue.

Your choices do not have to change now. In fact with Labour you will be given even greater flexibility in September - with the chance, in many cases, to study an extra subject and expand the breadth of your horizons.

But we now need from the government some clarity on the following issues:

What are the syllabuses for the new specifications?

What will universities base their offers on instead?

How will exam boards cope with the massive deluge of marking in 2017?

How does this affect your funding?

And what preparation is being made for the probability that the Labour Party wins the election?

Parents, pupils and teachers need answers on these questions.

So my message to the Government is this:

We have been clear with our plans.

We have spelt out our timetable for re-coupling.

We have called on you to pause in the interests of classroom stability.

And we are asking you now - as a bare minimum - to write to every college and school facing these conundrums with detailed contingency planning.

At every step of the way we have pursued a non-partisan approach because we understand that a general election should never interrupt young people's efforts to secure their future happiness and prosperity.

By all means put our policy differences before the electorate. But do not ram through these reforms based upon a political timetable that damages pupils, parents, principals, heads and teachers.

TRANSFORMING TECHNICAL EDUCATION

However, it is not just the removal of AS levels.

Whether it is the falling number of youth apprenticeships; the falling number of STEM apprenticeships; the removal of practical work from examinations; the assault on FE funding - this government has no appreciation of the need for an inclusive approach to education.

And it is on technical and vocational education where this deficiency is most stark.

Fewer than 1 in 10 employers offer apprenticeships; Two thirds of which are at a level which would not be recognised in countries like Germany, Australia and Switzerland;

And there has been a 17,000 fall in under 19 apprenticeship starts when you compare the last academic year to 2010/11.

There is no avoiding it: we do need more high-quality apprenticeships if we are to close our crippling technical skills gap.

But perhaps the real challenge is driving up quality.

It cannot be right that one label covers everything from a short-course level one to what amounts to a vocational PhD.

And, I would argue, that it is this elasticity which is allowing the Government to get away with the grade inflating numbers game which sees short-term employee training rebadged as an apprenticeship.

So the Labour Party will restore integrity, aspiration and quality to the apprenticeship brand by ensuring they are all at level 3 and last a minimum of two years.

And we will build better links between colleges and local labour markets by ensuring all vocational teachers spend time in industry refreshing their skills.

But we will also need to create a better pipeline for our new high quality apprenticeships. So we will create a new Gold Standard Technical Baccalaureate for 16-19 years olds that gives young people a clear and high quality route through the latter stages of their secondary education as well as ensuring that they continue to study English and Maths to 18 - which under Labour would be compulsory for all.

However, I think we need to be frank that if our ambition is to have one of the best skilled workforces in the world then our further education system also demands reform.

As I said earlier, I understand the challenges that come with your inheritance.

But as I also made clear none of us can be relaxed about so many kids leaving education without the basics in maths and English.

These are core 21st century skills and the OECD report which showed England's young people, almost uniquely, with poorer literacy and numeracy skills than their older contemporaries should send shivers down all of our spines.

I absolutely agree with the AoC's manifesto yesterday that there is a clear gap in the qualifications suite when it comes to practical English and Maths . Young people who have failed to get a good pass in GCSE Maths and English clearly require a new approach in terms of pedagogy, syllabus and assessment.

Mandating endless re-takes of the same qualification is no way to deliver an inspiring education.

That is not a softening of standards - that is basic common sense.

So just as we can commit ourselves to continuing Level 3 Core Maths, so I want to work with you to develop a post-16 Level 2 Core Maths qualification focused on practical and applied learning providing the real skills young people need.

However, if we are serious about our Tech Bacc being a gold standard then it must be seen that way by all - by parents, businesses, colleges and, most of all, by young people themselves.

It should only be delivered by highly qualified teachers who understand how to tailor curricula to the diverse needs of college students.

And it should only be delivered in colleges that have excellent links to local industry so that pupils have the access to all the rich specialist knowledge they will need to succeed in local businesses.

Therefore, a 2015 Labour government will transform the highest performing FE colleges into new 'Institutes of Technical Education' based upon a college demonstrating clear excellence in vocational teaching, strong links with local businesses, and high standards of English and Maths provision.

CAREERS

However, as your manifesto also points out - even if we do successfully transform technical education there is no guarantee young people in schools will hear about it.

I saw this first-hand when I visited North Warwickshire College and spoke to apprentices on the prestigious Jaguar Land Rover scheme.

They were effusive with praise for the rigour and enjoyment of their apprenticeship.

But having been shunted from school to university to employment before finally chancing upon the scheme, all but one of them felt they had been short-changed by the lack of independent careers advice they received when making their choices.

None of which will surprise this audience, I am sure.

Because time and time again I hear about college liaison officers being shut out of taster days; about their recruitment materials being blocked; and about them being refused access to speak to local school pupils about the opportunities they offer.

Apart, that is, from the ones they are deliberately seeking to offload.

So let me make it very clear: within the broad area of the school to work transition, I believe there is no other policy agenda where the Government has so miserably failed our young people as careers, advice and guidance.

Whether it is low career aspirations in disadvantaged young people, vested interests conspiring against a true understanding of apprenticeships and high-quality vocational routes in colleges, or a chronic mismatch between courses and labour market demand, the imprints of the government's shoddy neglect can be seen everywhere.

Now, I am also aware that this country has never enjoyed a 'golden age' of careers guidance or education.

Independence may be a serious issue when it comes to schools, but at least they - unlike the old Connexions service - have advantages when it comes to access and, when they act impartially, a deeper understanding of their pupils.

What I believe we may need is a single school or college-based appointment responsible for building links with local businesses, understanding the local labour market and ensuring high quality careers advice.

And Chuka and I are working hard to trial Andrew Adonis's plans for Directors of Enterprise, based in schools.

But the AoC manifesto is absolutely right - collaboration between institutions must be enforced.

We can no longer tolerate vested interests in this sector to do often irreparable damage to young peoples' opportunities.

Similarly, I also believe there is a strong case to be made for extending destination measures, so that schools and colleges take on responsibility for collecting data on their former pupils for up to three years after they have 'graduated.'

So I would encourage all colleges investing in their careers service infrastructure to give serious thought about collecting and publishing far more rigorous destinations data than the government is currently demanding.

We have already seen a coalition of head-teachers in the schools sector take steps to publish their own league tables with a broader set of performance measures and I would certainly put more rigorous destinations data in that category.

CONCLUSION

Conference, the story of the rise of Birmingham is a story of this city's ability to prepare itself for challenging, new, economic circumstances.

We face similar such challenges today.

And the model of recent years - atomisation rather than collaboration in our schools and college system; vocational education downgraded in favour of academic; practical learning removed for theoretical; a failure to think strategically about the skills sectors we need - will no longer do.

Around the world - from the ITE's of Singapore to the Community Colleges of America - advanced economies are refitting their education and skills system.

We in the Labour Party regard Further Education colleges as a vital partner in our education and skills strategy.

And, come May 8th, we look forward to working with you.