Power lunch with Phil Willis MP [1]

Written by **Dr Eamonn Butler** [2] | Friday 7 March 2008

Libdem MP Phil Willis was our guest at a Power Lunch this week. As Chair of the Innovations, Universities and Skills Select Committee, he chose to raise the question whether labour (small L that is) was a global commodity or a national asset.

Many politicians think about skills in terms of producing the future skills that Britain will need. But Willis takes the view that we should be producing the skills that the world will need. I think that's a fair point. We live in what my colleague Madsen Pirie in an ASI report [3] called a 'people economy' where your best productive asset is people and their brains and skills - and people are much more mobile than land or factories or machines. So we should think globally about them. Every knows that 600,000 people have migrated to the UK, mostly from Eastern Europe, and joined the workforce in the last year or so. But then there are more than four million Brits working abroad. We get around ? and that's quite right.

We don't need to be self-sufficient in skills any more than we need to be self-sufficient in bananas. We can buy skills from the world, and they can buy ours. We're talking about building four new nuclear power plants ? but the expertise to build them won't come from the UK alone, they will come from Japan and lots of other places which have the right people with the right skills.

I guess the policy conclusions are first, that we need to develop skills for the global marketplace, not just the skills that we think we need here and now. And second, if we are going to get all these skilled people to come to the UK and undertake the work that we can't do ourselves, we have to make the UK an attractive place to live. That means a relaxed, open, tolerant society, with good public services and low taxation. Unfortunately (as any non-dom will tell you) the present government seems to lack the skills to produce that happy prospect. Back to school for them.

blog comments powered by Disqus [5]

Source URL: http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/miscellaneous/power-lunch-with-phil-willis-mp

Links:
[1] http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/miscellaneous/power-lunch-with-phil-willis-mp
[2] http://www.adamsmith.org/authors/dr-eamonn-butler
[3] http://www.adamsmith.org/images/uploads/publications/people-economy.pdf
[4] http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript
[5] http://disqus.com