Why are so many Lib Dems against school choice? [1]

Written by Felix Bungay [2] | Tuesday 21 September 2010

One of the many ?storms in a teacup? at the Liberal Democrat conference has been about school choice. Lib Dem members have successfully passed a motion against Michael Gove?s free schools and several lively fringe debates have been had on the subject. The question is why would any party that purports to be liberal reject the idea of giving parents and schools more freedom?

While we may speculate as to why this is, we should note the existing schools system is both unfair and needlessly bureaucratic. Currently, parents who are not wealthy enough to send their children to private schools, have no choice. The central planners at the LGA?s ?match? supply and demand for school places, somehow entrusting in Soviet style economic models which have been laughed out of existence elsewhere. House prices reflect the local schools quality, leading to ?post code lotteries? and making a mockery of any claims that the system is comprehensive (not that it should be).

Peter Downes, the Lib Dem councillor who tabled the motion seems to be quite happy with this. He says, ?"Academies and free schools are likely to be divisive, costly and unfair. They're in the statute book, on the shelf, and that's where they should stay." Downes? evidently relies on the state to magically provide better schools, arguing that the most dangerous element of free schools is "the idea that the principles of the marketplace can be applied to state-funded education". Downes is clearly rejecting the self-evident way forward in providing greater choice, a concept that was first laid down by Andrew Adonis and is now picked up by Gove and the Coalition. Quite how schools are meant to improve without being subject to the market forces is between Downes and his comrades against the Coalition. No doubt they purport the answer lies in ?great resources? (read: more money) for schools.

Without some element of competition or rights to exit from a market (for parents to take their children elsewhere), Britain?s schools will remain in the sclerotic socialist system we have today. Successive ministers in both Labour and Conservative governments have clearly seen that this cannot continue, and have sought the obvious alternative in markets and freedom of choice. The only question is, when will the Lib Dem?s wake up and smell the coffee?

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