



Party conferences 2010

The Social Market Foundation is an independent public policy think-tank, developing and advancing innovative solutions across a broad range of economic and social policy. We publish original research, hold seminars and debates in Westminster and beyond, and run a diverse programme of events at the three main party conferences.

Since its foundation in 1989, the work of the SMF has been principally devoted to promoting the social market philosophy, which seeks to marry markets and social justice. It neither sees the market as a necessary evil nor as an end in itself but as a means to improve people's lives. It is underpinned by adherence to two key principles: first, a positive preference for market mechanisms, while recognising that a truly pro-market approach is often not a free-market one; and second, a belief that a sustainable market economy rests on social and political foundations that are widely regarded as fair. Our work aims to elucidate these ideas and to explain why the social market is a fruitful source of solutions to public policy problems.

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SMF party conference fringe manifesto 2010

The Social Market Foundation is a leading UK cross-party think-tank, developing and advancing innovative public policy solutions across a broad range of economic and social policy. The SMF combines a wealth of party conference experience with policy expertise to produce first-rate events. Strong links with each of the three main parties enable us to involve top politicians in our debates, making SMF events some of the best-attended conference events in the think-tank world.

Building on a highly successful programme in 2009, we are currently seeking partners to work with us at the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat conferences this year. Our 2010 fringe programme will tackle issues ranging from fiscal policy to healthcare through to pensions and the environment. This document outlines some of the hot topics that we would like to debate this autumn at the start of a new parliament, and tells you how you can work with us this year.

Autumn 2010: the first post-election conference season

Following the most closely fought election in decades, the United Kingdom now has a new Prime Minister overseeing the first peacetime coalition government for over 80 years. This historic agreement means the new Conservative Cabinet ministers have been joined by five senior Liberal Democrats. The Labour Party, now in opposition for the first time in 13 years, has begun its own leadership contest. Regardless of the winner, the shadow cabinet will doubtless contain many of the old hands sitting alongside some new faces. The overall look of the 2010 Parliament has changed completely with over 200 new MPs entering the Commons, the biggest turnover since 1945. The class of 2010 will shape public policy in the UK for the next generation.

In the context of such dramatic change, and with many daunting policy challenges ahead, the 2010 party conference season promises to be one of the most interesting and significant for years. With the political and policy landscape in flux, there has rarely been a more important time for open debate and discussion about the policy challenges ahead and the right way to tackling them.

For the SMF, and other organisations, these changes have two key consequences:

1. In the context of a turbulent political backdrop and the most challenging fiscal environment for a generation, there is an urgent need for new ideas to inform the policy direction of all the major political parties.
2. The shifting political landscape, the 'New Politics', underscores the need for the kind of independent, cross-party policy debate at which SMF, as a strictly non-partisan think-tank, excels.

Our conference fringe programme for 2010 will work across the three political parties to further our aim of producing fascinating debates, innovative thinking and influential policy ideas.

SMF party conference activity in 2009

The 2009 SMF party conference fringe programme was our most successful ever. Speakers at our 39 fringe events last year included:

- **Michael Gove MP** – Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Family
- **Lord Mandelson** – Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills
- **Theresa May MP** – Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
- **Dr Vince Cable MP** – Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, Liberal Democrat
- **Liam Byrne MP** – Chief Secretary to the Treasury
- **Sarah Teather MP** – Shadow Housing Minister, Liberal Democrats
- **Oliver Letwin MP** – Chair of the Conservative Party's Policy Review
- **Nick Timmins** – Financial Times
- **Lord Adonis** – Secretary of State for Transport
- **David Willetts MP** – Shadow Secretary of State for Universities and Skills
- **John McFall MP** – Chairman of the Treasury Committee
- **Ben Bradshaw MP** – Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
- **Caroline Spelman** – Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government
- **Michael White** – The Guardian
- **Ed Vaizey MP** – Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
- **David Lammy MP** – Minister for Higher Education
- **Angela Eagle MP** – Minister of State for Pensions and the Aging Society
- **Will Hutton** – Executive Vice Chair, Work Foundation
- **Brendan Barber** – General Secretary, TUC

Working with us at conference

The SMF has over 10 years of experience at organising high-profile, cutting-edge debates at the party conferences.

Supporters of SMF conference fringe events have the opportunity to:

- help shape the key questions for debate;
- input into the speaker line up;
- build brand profile through SMF's marketing and promotion;
- network with conference delegates.

Our sponsoring partners benefit from SMF's many years of experience at running successful party conference fringe events. In particular, sponsors can expect:

- excellent administrative services, with our team handling all aspects of the event administration and logistics;
- regular liaison, with a dedicated conference manager;
- an excellent fringe event without the hassle!

With input from our sponsors, we design each fringe event to be as interesting and topical as possible. Our conference team works with our sponsors to shape the focus and the format of the debate. Further benefits to sponsors include: one place on the panel for a speaker from their organisation (where appropriate to the content of the event), and space for banner stands and associated literature at the event.

The SMF takes responsibility for the project management of your event including:

- securing panel speakers and speaker management;
- booking of venues (both within and outside the secure zones);
- event promotion, including entry in the parties' fringe listings and our double page adverts in the fringe guides (featuring sponsor logos); in our flyers which go to all delegates, and where appropriate individual targeted invitations to prospective attendees;
- guidance on the process of obtaining a conference pass or passes;
- booking of catering, audio-visual equipment and undertaking all logistics;
- transfer of sponsor banner stands and literature to and from the conference(s);
- on-the-day management of the event.

Our party conferences fringe programme has been a key element of the SMF's work for many years, which is why we have a full-time conference manager, who works all year on preparing and delivering our programme of debates across the three party conferences. This enables us to offer an excellent standard of service to our sponsors, as many of last year's partners can attest.

"Very well organised and attended events with excellent panellists stimulating an interesting discussion on the key pensions issues." John Jory, B&CE Benefit Systems, 2009 sponsor

"Working with SMF at the 2009 party conferences helped us to reach a wide range of policymakers and opinion formers. The events were well organised, with good speaker line ups and excellent participation from SMF staff all contributing to a high quality debate." Ann Dawson, Camelot, 2009 sponsor

SMF Conference Fringe 2010 Themes

Below are some of the themes we hope to examine at this year's party conferences events. We would be delighted to discuss these or other areas of mutual interest, with potential sponsors. For further information, please contact Rachel Baker, Conference Manager on 020 7227 4404 or email RBaker@smf.co.uk

PARTY CONFERENCE FRINGE THEMES 2010

The new economy and unemployment

Industrial strategy for the 21st century

As the UK economy crawls out of recession, financial services are set to make a reduced contribution to our national income and employment. With rapidly rising skill-levels in emerging economies, international competition for the industries of the future is intensifying. Yet the debate around what should replace financial services in driving economic growth in the UK is only just beginning. Since the 1970s, successive governments' industrial strategies have consisted of little more than judiciously applied tax incentives: governments were otherwise encouraged to allow industry to thrive in an environment of benign neglect justified by a narrative of 'efficient markets'. But after the crash, the hunt is on for a new role for government in stewarding the development of new sources of jobs and wealth creation in the UK.

- What is the right role for government in developing the industries of the future?
- How far should government go in trying to pick winners and stimulate the green industry?
- Is the government's skills strategy the right one to ensure we have the human capital for the jobs of the future?

Tackling unemployment in the recovery

The human impact of a long and hard recession will continue to be felt for months and years to come. Unemployment may well continue to rise and evidence from past recessions shows that those areas hardest hit in the crash are the last to benefit from new growth.

The Conservatives emphasise that their 'Our Work Programme' will be delivered through private and voluntary sector providers, which will be rewarded on a payment by results basis for getting people into sustainable work; The Labour manifesto asserts that 200,000 plus jobs will be created through the Future Jobs Fund, with a job or training place for young people who are out of work for six months, but benefits will be cut at ten months if they refuse to take part; and anyone unemployed for more than two years guaranteed work, but no option of life on benefits.

The new government will have radical ideas about the next steps in welfare reform and what employment services should look like to tackle the highest level of unemployment for well over a decade.

- What should the government do to tackle the stubbornly high numbers of inactive people?
- What will the main differences be between the government's new 'Our Work Programme' and the 'Future Jobs Fund'?
- How can we ensure that deprived areas of the country don't get left behind in the recovery?

Public services and public spending

More for less: Cuts without pain?

Amid gathering gloom about the budget cuts on the way for public sector services, it is important to remember that many organisations do routinely succeed in reducing costs without compromising on quality or reducing the number of staff. It is possible to cut some costs without significantly affecting services. Changes to operating practices, such as the adoption of new information technologies in service delivery, also create opportunities to create efficiencies that deserve attention.

- Where can public sector efficiency gains be made?
- What options to increase efficiency are left to central government if the era of target setting is over?
- Do public sector organisations always find it more difficult to achieve the cultural shift necessary to make substantial gains in efficiency?
- Would 'mutualism' in public services lead to efficiency gains or service improvements?

What to cut and when

Given the UK's fiscal predicament, the new government will have no choice but to offer the public an unpalatable mix of spending cuts and tax rises. An emergency budget under the new government can be expected in June. The UK government must get a grip on its budget deficit to ensure that investors remain confident in the long term prospects for the economy, and UK gilts remain investment-grade. There are both policy and political dimensions to this inevitable period of fiscal belt-tightening. Cuts must be made without threatening what seems to be a fragile economic recovery – a difficult policy judgement about when to begin fiscal consolidation. And governments must act without losing public support – a difficult political balance.

- When should government aim to begin the hard work of bringing down the deficit?
- Where and how should cuts be made?
- What should be the balance between spending cuts and tax rises?

Moving public services online

One way in which services in both the public and private sectors have been transformed over the past decade is through the use of the internet. People routinely book travel online, order groceries and interact socially through the web. By comparison, public services have lagged behind, even though enormous potential exists to use web-based services to improve both efficiency and the user experience. The Cabinet Office's recent paper *Putting the Frontline First* demonstrated a clear intent for government to make a radical shift online. Integration of different government services, currently a huge administrative challenge, might be achievable through a stronger focus on the potential of web-based interaction with users.

- Do web-based public services and 'e-government' offer real potential for efficiency savings and service improvements?
- Would a focus on moving services online risk exacerbating inequalities and creating an underclass of people without access to the internet?

A new fiscal framework

The independence of the Bank of England is regarded as one of the greatest achievements of the last Labour government, removing monetary policy from political control. It seems increasingly likely that fiscal policy may follow suit, with Conservative proposals to create an independent body responsible for undertaking fiscal projections and overseeing government fiscal policy. But a body such as this can take a multitude of forms and assume a wide range of responsibilities. The time is right to debate what form fiscal independence should take in the UK.

- Would an independent fiscal body undermine the democratic right of governments to decide how to raise revenue and spend taxpayers' money?
- Will an independent fiscal policymaking body ever be considered legitimate?
- The crisis has seen the Bank of England closely co-ordinate policy with government. Does independent monetary policymaking only work in the good times?

Public sector pension reform

Generous defined-benefit pension schemes have been a feature of working-life in many parts of the public sector, and have been accused by some of 'gumming-up' the labour market as public workers become resistant to forgoing entitlements. However, over the last decade, some commentators have increasingly questioned whether the favourable terms of public sector pensions, compared to defined-contribution schemes in the private sector, can be justified by salary differentials. Critics argue that the UK confronts an unsustainable public-sector pension time-bomb, and in the context of an ageing population and the current fiscal crisis, reform to public sector pensions is needed. However, it is far from clear how any reform, or move to defined-contribution pensions in the public sector could be funded, given that current workers would effectively be paying for their own pensions and those of existing retirees.

- What is the future for public sector pensions in the UK? Is reform likely or imminent?
- Do public sector pensions really impose rigidities on the labour market?

Breaking the crime-cycle

Despite substantial reforms to the offender management system in the UK over the past decade, re-offending rates remain extremely high. On the basis of the main parties' spending plans, the Home Office and Ministry of Justice can expect deep cuts to their departmental budgets of up to 25% over the next parliament. Unless radical reforms are made, we can expect crime and re-offending to rise. Is payment-by-results the answer?

- Why has the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) failed to make a dent in recidivism rates?
- Is payment for outcomes a viable approach?
- How would it work and what kind of offenders should it apply to?

Health and social care

Personalisation in health and social care

One of the most significant trends in health and social care is the evolving role of the state: from being a monopoly provider of services toward being a commissioner – guaranteeing fairness and quality through effective manipulation of markets comprising public, private and third sector service providers. A key consequence of this shift is to enable far greater personalisation for the individual through commissioning by, and for, the individual. High quality commissioning offers the potential for services to be tailored to the needs of users. This is particularly important for people with complex needs such as multiple chronic conditions. However, personalisation remains an evolving agenda, with all stakeholders refining their methods and understanding.

- Can commissioners contribute to the personalisation of care?
- Are Individual Budgets the best solution to personalisation and integration of services?
- What safeguards should be put in place to protect both service users and taxpayers?
- Is there the prospect of personalisation leading to the fragmentation of shared services?

Hospitals

The future of hospitals is one of the central questions for the NHS. The financial crisis coupled with a general trend towards delivering more services in the community means that many hospitals face closure. But the political challenge this presents is immense, with an independent MP already in parliament as a result of a campaign against hospital closure. Additionally the entrance of new providers into the NHS market raises interesting questions about the importance of public ownership, especially with regard to patient choices.

- Do people care who owns hospitals?
- Should the NHS embark on a programme of hospital closures?
- Are the political challenges of service reconfiguration insurmountable?

An independent NHS?

Politicians are often accused of ‘meddling’ in the NHS. Their detractors claim that political interference in healthcare, embodied in an extensive regime of performance targets, distorts clinical priorities. While much of the criticism of targets is unjustified there is an emerging consensus that politicians should step back from the day to day running of the health service. The Conservatives have raised the prospect of an independent board to manage the strategic direction of the NHS. But the question of how to ensure accountability in a more independent system remains.

- Is the NHS inevitably a political entity given that when problems occur, the public holds politicians responsible?
- What would be the merits of an independent NHS?
- Should targets remain even in a more decentralised system?

Charging in health services

With the NHS facing an unprecedented dip in funding, despite political promises to the contrary, the challenge is to deliver high quality services in a resource constrained environment. Efficiency savings may not be enough to cope with the downturn and the NHS has shown itself very bad at managing demand for services. The SMF has argued for the introduction of a small charge to visit the GP aimed at richer people. This charge would be aimed at managing demand and it a standard policy instrument in many OECD countries. But in the UK charging is a political taboo – is it time for this to change?

- Should demand management through charging be an explicit part of the NHS toolkit?
- Is charging the lesser of two evils or an affront to the principles of the NHS?
- Why are UK health services so reluctant to consider new charges when people pay for prescriptions, dental and optical services?

Funding long-term care for older people

The last year has been a highly significant one for the long-term care funding reform agenda, with the publication of a Green Paper, the unexpected announcement of the Personal Care at Home Bill, and the Conservative proposal for a Home Protection Scheme. In short, long-term care funding has become a political, and sometimes divisive, issue, despite many commentators highlighting the need for broad consensus as a pre-requisite for real reform occurring.

- What should be the shape of the partnership between the individual and the state in relation to long-term care funding?
- What should be the role of risk-pooling in long-term care funding?
- How can consensus on long-term care funding reform be achieved, both across the political parties, and with the public?

Behaviour change and personal responsibility for health

The NHS is ever more burdened with diseases caused by unhealthy lifestyles. The dramatic rises in obesity and alcohol consumption have led some to argue that government must encourage greater personal responsibility for health, perhaps by denying care to those who contribute to their own burden of ill health. But changing behaviour is not as simple as taking a 'carrot and stick' approach. Instead policymakers must seek to understand the complex range of factors that lead individuals to lead unhealthy lives. And if social pressures lead people to become obese or to drink to much, is it really fair to connect personal responsibility to the use of health services?

- Should the NHS encourage greater personal responsibility for healthcare by denying care?
- To what extent should government get involved in individual health choices?
- Can society be 'redesigned' to remove the pressures that lead to unhealthy choices?

Energy and climate change

Cutting carbon and stimulating green investment

Following the international Copenhagen conference, climate change has risen back up the political agenda. With national governments failing to agree to a comprehensive range of solutions there is an urgent need for new policy ideas to help reduce emissions and smooth the transition to a more sustainable energy policy. Central to this is a market in carbon that, through the Emissions Trading Scheme, provides market incentives for companies to change their energy consumption. But the price of carbon is volatile – how can we confront this challenge? The Conservative manifesto asserts that they will reform the Climate Change Levy to provide a floor price for carbon, delivering the right climate for investment in low carbon energy production

- What incentives do companies need to de-carbonise?
- Should government set a floor price for carbon or will a tax be required?

Carbon capture and storage

A substantial reduction in carbon emissions to tackle climate change will not be achieved simply by changing individual behaviour. Innovative technology is also required, and central to this is carbon capture and storage in energy production. While UK companies are global leaders in this field, we lag behind many of our European partners in the speed at which new technologies to capture carbon emissions can be piloted and best practice is disseminated.

- What should government do to speed up the approval of carbon capture pilots?
- What role can this new industry play in promoting economic recovery?

Fossil fuels, renewable energy and nuclear power

Energy security and climate change are intimately interconnected when it comes to the right approach to meeting our need for power. While there is wide acceptance that we must move away from dependence on fossil fuels, not least because it leaves the UK dependent on the supply of energy from potentially unstable parts of the world, there is no parallel consensus on the right way to achieve change. Renewable energies offer the tantalising prospect of low carbon energy but are criticised as expensive, unreliable and difficult to scale up to meet the UK's energy needs. On the other hand nuclear power is both literally and politically toxic.

- What role should nuclear play in meeting future energy needs?
- Is energy security a more pressing concern than climate change in motivating policymakers to shift away from fossil fuels?
- What incentives can government offer to speed the development of renewable technologies?

Energy grids

Currently some of the most interesting environmental policy debates are around the future of the UK's energy networks. This question is not simply about the source of energy – whether fossil fuels or renewables – but also about the infrastructure of the national grid. The move towards smart grids that use sophisticated technology to control the flow of power around the network has long been suggested as a way of making energy use more efficient and reducing the amount of energy lost between the power station and the home. As the UK emerges from recession, the efficient use of energy can be a powerful driver of economic recovery.

The Conservatives wish to limit harmful emissions from UK power stations by taking steps to encourage new low carbon energy production, including introducing an Emissions Performance Standard to limit the levels of greenhouse gases that power stations produce.

- What policies should government adopt to encourage the development of smart grids?
- Is this a technological leap too far?
- Would smart grids influence consumer behaviour so that the need to save energy is less urgent?

Keeping the lights on

Ofgem's 2010 report made clear that current market arrangements are failing to incentivise the necessary investment in the UK's energy infrastructure. Ofgem has argued that much greater state intervention will be needed if we are to unlock the £200bn of investment that will be required to keep the lights on.

- Has the privatisation of the energy industry been a failure?
- How should we structure energy markets to ensure that operators invest in infrastructure?
- Is it possible to set the right incentives for a profit-maximising company?

Transport

Road user charging: politically toxic or more necessary than ever?

Congestion on the roads imposes massive costs on the economy, calculated at up to £20bn per year. This is due at least in part to the fact that use of the roads is effectively priced at zero – motorists have no incentive to reduce congestion. Proposals to introduce road user charging have foundered in the face of public resistance to change. However, road charging would arguably provide a crucial boost to the economy through reducing congestion.

- How can public resistance to road charging be overcome?
- What does the experience of other countries tell us about the potential impact of road charging?

Greening transport

Transport policy sometimes seems to be an eternal quest for the holy grail of modal shift – substantially reducing the number of car journeys and replacing them with public transport. The laudable goal of modal shift is to curtail the environmental damage of motoring by relying more on environmentally friendly public transport. But no convincing evidence has been presented to demonstrate how modal shift can be achieved. And the picture is complicated by an understanding of the importance of car ownership not only for convenient travel but also to an individual's social status – it will be difficult to move people away from the automobile. Some argue that the debate now should be about the potential to make the necessary environmental gains through 'greening' car journeys rather than relying on an unlikely modal shift.

- Is the goal of effecting modal shift simply unrealistic?
- Is the environmentally friendly car a realistic possibility?
- What can behavioural economics teach us about car use and public transport choices?

The future of the rail network

Even in the face of an unprecedented fiscal crisis, big infrastructure projects have not been entirely abandoned. The creation of a high speed rail network is a policy favoured across the political spectrum. No-one doubts the importance of investing in a modern transport infrastructure. But is investment in a high-speed rail network now viable? And what would be the opportunity cost of focusing on such an investment in terms of reduced investment in the conventional rail network and other transport infrastructure, such as the road network?

- Does the current franchise model provide the right incentives for investment in the conventional rail network?
- Will the resources required for a new high speed line lead to neglect of the existing network or other transport infrastructure?
- Should public infrastructure projects like high speed rails be abandoned in the light of pressing needs in other parts of the transport infrastructure?

Banking, home-ownership and trust in financial services

“Is my money really safe?”

A Conservative government will promote responsible consumer finance by creating a powerful Consumer Protection Agency (CPA) to take over the Financial Services Authority's consumer protection role. In addition, they will give the CPA new powers to define and ban excessive borrowing rates on store cards; launch Britain's first free national financial advice service, funded in full through a new social responsibility levy on the financial services sector.

Once growth returns, it will be necessary to rebalance the UK economy with households increasing their savings ratios. There is therefore a clear public policy interest in ensuring that the banking system works for depositors. Crucial to this is trust, which underpins all aspects of financial services, both in terms of individuals having the confidence to use investment products, and to trust banks with their money.

- What has been the impact of the crash on people's perceptions of the security of their savings?
- What should institutions and government do to boost trust in financial services?
- What will be the effect of a prolonged period of exceptionally low interest rates on household attitudes to saving?

Mortgage lending and the future of home ownership

The government plans to wind-up its emergency lending support for banks - the Special Liquidity Scheme and the Credit Guarantee Scheme - from 2012. But mortgage lenders are warning that rapid repayment of the £300bn that the government has lent them, before wholesale inter-bank lending resumes on a bigger scale, will bring mortgage lending to a juddering halt and rapidly raise the prices of loans. But extending the schemes would ultimately represent public subsidy for home-owners, supporting artificially high house prices with serious social consequences.

- How should the government unwind its support for mortgage lending?
- Is the political mantra of 'home-ownership for all' a busted flush?
- In light of FSA reviews on the topic, what next for the regulatory framework for mortgage lending the right one?

Financial regulation

In the UK, under a Labour government, the new Council for Financial Stability will monitor and help address asset bubbles and financial imbalances. Labour want to give the FSA additional powers if necessary to constrain and quash executive remuneration where it is a source of risk and instability. The global financial crisis has unleashed a torrent of regulatory reform proposals, from macro-prudential lending to the splitting off of investment and retail banking. Recent profitability of those financial institutions that did survive the crisis has kept the reform agenda alive, albeit with a greater focus on bonuses and risk-taking. With a new UK government in office and in control of the regulatory agenda, the 2010 party conferences will be an important opportunity to explore the future direction of regulation.

- What should be the key tenets of future reform to financial regulation?
- Can a new crisis be averted or prevented through reform?
- Will the need for international coordination in regulation ultimately stymie real change?

The Child Trust Fund at 8

The Child Trust Fund was introduced in 2002 as part of the government's asset-based welfare agenda. But in the light of the dire fiscal situation, opposition parties have proposed cutting back or scrapping the scheme. The Conservative government has made clear that they will no longer give the initial £250 to children from the better-off half of families.

- Can the CTF continue to be operated at low cost for the majority if high-savers are no longer encouraged to use the product?
- Is the experiment with asset-based welfare over?

Pension reform after the crisis: is there still consensus?

The years immediately prior to the global credit crunch were ones of intense activity in pension policy. Pension reform has soldiered on, despite the dramatic changes to the financial system, the labour market and private sector employers. However, numerous issues remain to be addressed, such as whether the labour market can adapt to an increased state pension age, and whether some employers will respond to so-called 'Personal Accounts' by levelling down their pension contributions. It is also likely that a new government may wish to stamp its own mark on pension reform, and the new direction for policy may well be becoming clear in the autumn of 2010.

- How has the pension reform agenda adapted to the dramatic economic events of recent years and how should it develop going forward?
- What are the principal pitfalls for policymakers as the UK attempts to improve rates of pension saving through wide-reaching reform?
- Have fundamental changes occurred in the environment for pension reform following the financial crisis, for example, attitudes to investment risk?

Families, schools and education

For richer, for poorer

There has been huge interest during the last year in the role of the tax and benefits system in family policy. While the Conservatives are committed to recognising marriage in the tax system, Labour thinks this approach is unfair to single people. Evidence suggests that using the tax system to support married couples can have an effect in increasing the number of people who marry and remain married. But to make a big difference would be very expensive.

- Is it fair that married couples should receive tax breaks?
- Should government use the tax and benefit system as a tool of family policy?
- Is there such a thing as a neutral tax and benefit system for marriage?

Childcare vouchers and support for working parents

2010 has seen the re-emergence of debate about childcare vouchers. With new analysis by the Social Market Foundation concluding that the recipients of vouchers are a cross-section of society as a whole, fears that the system disproportionately benefits the well-off are unfounded. Nevertheless the right approach to childcare remains at the top of the political agenda.

The Conservatives want to introduce a new system of flexible parental leave which lets parents share maternity leave between them, while ensuring that parents on leave can stay in touch with their employer. They support the provision of free nursery care for pre-school children, and want that support to be provided by a diverse range of providers. The Conservative government will review the way the childcare industry is regulated and funded to ensure that no providers, including childminders, are put at a disadvantage.

While Labour want an expansion of free nursery places for two year olds and 15 hours a week of flexible, free nursery education for three and four year olds.

- What should be the primary aim of early years childcare? Helping parents back to work or providing a nurturing environment for young children?
- Should government press harder for the more widespread adoption of childcare voucher schemes?
- Are parents from Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) at a permanent disadvantage in making use of available government support?

Schools: more radical reform on the way?

Parental school choice has the potential to help drive up standards in schools. But this approach has long been hampered by a lack of school places for parents to choose from, making choice more virtual than real. Conservative proposals to free up parents to start their own schools offer the opportunity to greatly expand school choice in the UK. They also want to introduce a pupil premium which will propose extra funding for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the Liberal Democrats want to increase the funding of the most disadvantaged pupils, around one million children. They want to invest £2.5 billion in their 'Pupil Premium' to boost education opportunities for every child.

- Is choice the solution to improving school performance?
- Will putting the power in the hands of parents be the right way to achieve greater choice?
- Is the Swedish model the right one for Britain?

Higher education: more like the US?

The Browne Review of higher education is set to report in the summer, proposing new tuition fee caps for universities. With state funding set to be heavily squeezed over the next decade, it is likely that the review will herald the development of a real market in higher education, with the UK's top institutions set to charge ever higher fees.

- How high should fees rise if the UK is to retain its place in the top league of HE institutions?
- Is the market in HE working?
- How can we overcome the tension between rising fees and widening access?

Communities and the regions

Cracking the housing supply problem

Despite falls in 2008, house prices in the UK remain high, with implications for the ability of millions of people to own their own homes. While many policy options exist for reducing the demand for housing through taxation or regulation, the real solution lies in increasing the rate of home building. The Conservatives want to introduce a new 'open source' planning system. They believe that this proposed planning system is vital for a strong economy, for an attractive and sustainable environment, and for a successful democracy. The new system, they believe, will mean that people in each neighbourhood will be able to specify what kind of development they want to see in their area. These neighbourhood plans will be consolidated into a local plan. The Conservatives want to abolish the entire tier of regional planning, including the Regional Spatial Strategies and building targets. They propose that developers will have to pay a tariff to the local authority to compensate the community for loss of amenity and costs of additional infrastructure. The tariff will replace the payments and levies on development that have grown up under Labour. A portion of this tariff will be kept by the neighbourhoods, in which a given development takes place, providing clear incentives for communities which go for growth.

- What sort of combination of carrot and stick is necessary to increase housing supply?
- Is a property tax, instead of stamp duty, the best way to encourage a better match between housing needs and capacity?
- Are the Conservative Party's proposed reforms to incentivise new developments the solution to the problem?

Localism: a political mirage?

Opposition parties decry the tendency of government to centralise power – reducing the autonomy of local government or local providers of services. But when in power many politicians experience a Damascene conversion to the idea that decisive action (particularly in a challenging economic climate) requires central executive decision making. It is therefore right to ask if there is an approach to government that would make the most of innovation at a local level while also making room for the type of interventions by central government that will be required to deal with the public finances. Added to this debate is the ongoing tension between national services and local variation. People expect a *national health service* but value for money can only be secured with a relentless focus on local need – perhaps leading to variations that will be politically unacceptable.

- Is centralised government inevitable in the decade ahead?
- Are ideas like locally-determined benefit regimes viable?
- Can the tension between national standards and locally tailored services ever be resolved?
- Are local institutions sufficiently robust to drive reform without impetus from central government?

Technology

Trust, science and the media

Polling companies like Ipsos-MORI have tracked a steady decline in trust over the past decade. Fewer people now trust institutions like the government or the media to tell them the truth. Nowhere is this lack of trust more corrosive than in medical scare stories, notably the controversy over the MMR vaccine. More recently a lack of trust in scientists has added to growing public sentiment that the claims of catastrophic global warming may be exaggerated, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The stock policy response to the erosion of trust is to offer more information, delivered through agencies like the NHS that are more trusted than government. But this may not be sufficient to transform trust in society.

- To what extent is the decline of trust amenable to government intervention?
- Does it matter if the public doesn't trust the government?
- Are governments justified in acting to address issues like climate change if the public do not trust the evidence base?

Communications and Digital Britain

With the publication of the Digital Britain report and subsequent Bill the Government set ambitious plans for the universal access to broadband internet, as well as for the use of the internet to deliver public services. Some of the plans, particularly those relating to file-sharing, have been received with widespread scepticism over their potential effectiveness. There remains much policy work to be done to develop the government's vision of a nation fully exploiting the potential of the internet and digital communications.

- File sharing – how effective can new legislation be?
- Skills for a broadband Britain – giving new internet users the skills to exploit the internet
- Moving public services online: how can we ensure that online services are fit for purpose?
- Creative industries – encouraging innovative new business models
- Cloud cover – is nationwide wi-fi internet access a reality for the near future?
- Google or the Government – who should we trust with our data?

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