

# Consensus wins over root and branch

**G**IVEN THAT the Further and Higher Education Bill received royal assent just five days before the general election was announced, I think it is interesting to reflect upon whether it is indeed a Conservative Act or rather more of a bipartisan measure. As it happens I have been thinking a lot about these issues and discussing them with undergraduate and postgraduate students in a series of lecture courses I have been giving on educational policy.

One might consider the Act, one which had a large measure of consensus across the political parties. Given the fact that the Act is to create a unitary system of higher education or rather one in which the vast majority of higher education institutions are called universities, this might be expected to command widespread and cross-party support.

However, the system it replaces is the one essentially created by Labour just over 25 years ago. In the now famous or perhaps infamous Woolwich speech Antony Crosland, then Labour's Secretary of State for Education, instigated the binary policy of higher education with two different kinds of institutions – the polytechnics, based on local authority colleges of technology and the traditional universities.

The aim then was to ensure that the two types of institution provided different types of courses for different types of student; on the one hand technologically-based, applied subjects and on the



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other more traditionally academic and abstract or theoretical.

But is it the case that Conservatives now are more interested than Labour in one coherent or comprehensive system of higher education, with one unitary name for all institutions? It is true that, recently, the Conservatives have aimed for a mass rather than an elite system of higher education in this latest piece of legislation.

However, Labour, in creating the binary policy, aimed to develop a wider involvement of students in higher education than had been the case hitherto, albeit that the form was to be a "selective" rather than comprehensive system.

In any event, 25 years is a long time and both Tories and Labour may have changed their policies. Twenty-five years ago both political parties were dedicated to an expansion of educational opportunities, around the principle of equality of educational opportunity. But there was obvious disagreements on the form and extent of such expansion.

As a result of the Labour policies there developed a Conservative backlash. This was most explicitly articulated through the Black papers and the development of notions of "more means worse". Although the Tories were committed to an expansion of educational opportunities they remain more wedded to an elite system of higher education.

But Labour, too, developed a curious and contradictory set of policies. They abolished bipartite, or tripartite, secondary education in favour of comprehensive schools only to replace that "selective" system with selection further up the age and educational hierarchy in terms of two different sorts of higher education institutions. I've always thought it a bit of an anomaly and one difficult to explain that the two contradictory policies were developed under the same Secretary of State for Education, namely the redoubtable socialist Crosland.

The justification for the binary policy was given as not only different types of courses for different students but also the fact that the local authority system of colleges mirrored state secondary

schooling whereas the universities mirrored the independent sector of schooling.

Over the past 25 years there have been major shifts and changes both within the system of higher education and the wider economic and political contexts. Both political parties have adapted and changed their policies in response to these wider economic and political developments. Despite the Tories' early reaction to the binary policy they accommodated to it and developed appropriate economic and financial measures to consolidate the differences between institutions.

It is only in the 1980s that the Tories have begun to reconsider the structures and finances of higher education, in response to the changing nature of the economic system and labour market in an increasingly international competitive context. Abandoning traditional long-term planning in favour of reliance more on market forces through "student demand" and external research contracts was begun in the mid-1980s and consolidated through the 1988 Education Reform Act. This began the process of creating autonomous institutions competing with each other for increasingly scarce public resources for students or research.

In the past four years this "new" system has blossomed through changes both to universities and polytechnics through corporate status and changes in funding via the research councils. Cut-throat competition now seems to be the order of the day. So although the

language of the FHE Act is that of an expansionist and comprehensive system it may belie the reality. Or perhaps, as with comprehensive schools, rather than the more formal "selective" grammar schools, it masks internal institutional diversity, and hierarchy.

It certainly seems that there are trends towards a more diverse rather than coherent or comprehensive system through these massive changes in funding both for teaching and research.

So it is likely that the effects of the FHE Act will be to consolidate hierarchies of educational institutions on the old university/polytechnic model with perhaps a slight allowance for some movement around the old boundary despite the change of name.

But would a Labour government make any difference? They will not be able to reverse all the higher education policies rapidly and in any event higher education is probably not high even on their list of educational priorities and rightly so. The most we can expect is that the rougher edges of cut-throat competition might be ironed out in the first instance through modified regulations about funding for students and possibly research. In the longer run a return to Labour's traditional systematic planning of types of courses instead of Tory root and branch competition seems, with the benefit of hindsight, to be fairer from the point of view of students than one in which the names are the same but the distributional effects far more sharply distinguished.