

# 'We risk failing to invest in the day after tomorrow'

More than 500 people from across the country attended the Campaigning Alliance for Lifelong Learning's February lobby of Parliament. They made sure their voices were heard, lobbying their MPs and ensuring politicians from all parties got the message that the loss of over a million adult learning places is unacceptable. **PAUL STANISTREET** reports

**I**'m here to battle for people who can't see much of a future but can have a better life if they are allowed to take up adult learning,' says Margaret East, Chair of WEA South Tyneside, a member of Unison, and a keen adult learner thoroughly convinced of the difference well-taught adult education classes can make to people's lives. She is sat with her WEA colleague Joan Grant in the Emmanuel Centre, in Westminster, at the start of the Campaigning Alliance for Lifelong Learning's lobby of Parliament. Like many of the hundreds of people turning up to register and to pick up their lobby packs, she is angry about the loss of 1.4 million publicly-funded adult learning places and passionate about the value of learning. 'I have benefited thoroughly from adult learning,' she told me. 'I was doing a really dull job. I was a comptometer operator for the Coal Board and I was redeployed to a job issuing wooden industrial pallets. I did it for 18 months. Then I had the opportunity to go to college to do a certificate in social work. I was 35 at the time. I was the youngest person on my course. And I worked in social work for 27 years. That's why I'm here today to fight for the cause.' For Joan, too, adult learning is about second chances. She has seized the opportunity to learn things that she didn't learn at school.

Now a pensioner, she believes adult learning to be crucial in keeping mentally active. 'Health problems are caused by sitting and being bored,' she says. 'That's why it would be far better if there were more courses or if the courses that existed could be kept open. I think it's very important that people can get out of the house and at the same time develop their minds and stop themselves going senile.'

People from all over the country attended the event, all keen to ensure that their MPs register their concern at the loss of publicly funded adult learning places. Some came from small locally organised groups, others from regional branches of organisations such as Unison, the University and College Union and the WEA. Most came in groups, but there were some individuals there too. A very wide range of possible ways of thinking about adult learning was in evidence, reflecting the exceedingly broad church CALL has come to represent. They were clear about what they wanted from the lobby. 'I want the Government to increase or at least not to cut funding for adult learning, particularly for so-called informal learning,' said Ron Marks, an adult learning tutor and Chairman of the Essex Federation of the WEA. In his own area, he told me, rising fees were making it difficult for people to afford courses. Retired people, in particular, were feeling pressed, and some

learners were withdrawing from courses. It's a story that was heard throughout the day, from all sorts of places. Representatives from organisations as diverse as the Church of England, the National Federation of Women's Institutes, the Refugee Council and the Muslim Council of Britain, were keen to share their concern at the direction of Government policy on adult learning, most convinced that the current balance between skills training and non-vocational education was badly skewed in favour of the former. What was at stake, all agreed, was much more than a few classes in much (and unfairly) derided subjects such as flower arranging and 'holiday Spanish': it was about the kind of democracy, the sort of civilisation, to which we, as a society, aspire.

## Long wait

There was a long wait in the cold for lobbyists outside the House of Commons, but the atmosphere was upbeat and serious. For many it was the first time they had attended a lobby or entered Parliament. Nick Robinson from the BBC stalked past, eyes fixed on his Blackberry. Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Hilary Benn walked hurriedly along the queue of lobbyists calling out: 'Is there anyone here from Leeds?' Some lobbyists had arranged to




Former Education Secretary, David Blunkett

meet their MPs, others hoped to 'green card' them once they reached Central Lobby. More than 150 MPs had already signed an Early Day Motion supporting CALL. It was standing room only by the time most of the throng reached Committee Room 14 to hear the speakers. The audience spilled out into the corridor. Julian Gravatt from the Association of Colleges was speaking. There had been a significant improvement in the quality of provision and of the facilities of further education over the past 10 years, he was saying, but he wanted to see those improvements shared by more people. The skills strategy, he said, had had the unintended consequence of causing colleges to raise fees for other courses, resulting in the closure of some. The theme was taken up by Gordon Marsden, MP for Blackpool South

and sponsor of the Early Day Motion. 'Adult learning is important because it gives people skills but it is also important because it gives people a sense of self-improvement and of life-enhancement,' he said. 'We need to have progression but we also have to be flexible, especially in times of recession, when there are new challenges and new opportunities. Demographic change means that there will be more older people who need to learn new skills and government policy has to be flexible and take that on board. We need to use the money that's there for Train to Gain much more flexibly. It's about scope and flexibility and it's also about departments in government picking up the tab because some of the things we are talking about are important social goods. We need both lifelong learning funding and skills funding.'

David Blunkett spoke next. Adult learning, he told lobbyists, was 'critical to national wellbeing and to the future'. He quoted at length from a braille copy of his famous foreword to *The Learning Age*, the Green Paper published while he was Secretary of State for Education and Employment, in 1998. 'As well as securing our economic future,' he said, 'learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation ... That is why we value learning for its own sake as well as for the equality of opportunity it brings'. Recognising the commitment of Secretary of State John Denham to adult education – 'he



“As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship”

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does give a damn’ – he called for a greater effort to link ‘a broader commitment to education’ to the immediate problems facing the country. ‘Adult education in its broader sense enabled people to move back into Civvy Street after the Second World War. We think we’re in difficulty over the next 18 months but it’s worth recalling what people had to put up with after the war and how adult education kept their horizons and visions going.’ Conservative Shadow Secretary of State David Willetts ‘completely agreed’ with the sentiments expressed in *The Learning Age* and with the aims of CALL. ‘This is a campaign that people who believe in adult education across all parties can support,’ he said. ‘It’s a part of any advanced civilisation that cares about its people that everybody has an opportunity for education throughout their

lives’. The current funding regime, he went on, ‘reduces education to paper qualifications. There’s more to life and more to education than that’. Stephen Williams, Liberal Democrat Shadow Secretary of State, agreed: ‘Lifelong learning is now something people up and down the country are having to invest time in to ensure that they can go out and earn a new living. It is vital to ensuring we emerge from these difficult times in a better state.’

#### **Huge achievement**

By the time John Denham addressed lobbyists, many were wondering out loud precisely why, given the apparent cross-party support for adult learning, they needed to be there at all. ‘The agenda that CALL has put together and the coalition of organisations

you have brought together seems to me overwhelmingly positive,’ he began. ‘When I read CALL’s statement, actually in the areas you set out as your priorities there has been huge achievement.’ Fifty-three per cent more money was now spent on further education than was the case 10 years ago, he said, while there had been a very significant extension of the right to learn. Over the past five years 2.5 million adults had learned to read and write for the first time, he added. ‘There’s a huge amount of activity going on to address many of the issues in your manifesto ... While it’s right to focus resources on the 2.5 million adults who can’t read or write, for example, or on those who need skills to get a job or to get on at work, that’s not the only point of learning and there must be space for learning we do for its own intrinsic value, where, if

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Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, John Denham

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there is a qualification, it is only incidental to the main reason for learning. I'm committed to that but I don't believe that subsidised courses in FE colleges are the only measure of it.' The way in which people learn had changed over the past few years, he said, with the expansion of informal forms of learning such as book groups and history societies. 'We need to recognise all those different ways of learning,' he said. But while acknowledging the 'huge value' of all the different ways in which learning takes place, he continued, we had also to recognise that there was not enough money to fund everything and that choices had to be made. The Government had chosen to prioritise learning that gets people into work 'ahead of subsidising Spanish for holidays'. It was clear from the chorus of boos and jeers that met this last remark that many in the audience objected violently to this way of characterising the sort of adult learning provision that had been lost over the past two years. A few accused the Secretary of State of 'arrogance' and of patronising his audience, made up largely of learners and learning practitioners.

Struggling at times to make himself heard above his audience, Mr Denham said that people had to realise that the Government had put a lot of funding into enabling informal learning that was not directly funded, subsidising museums to make them free, for example. There was an opportunity, he added, for the CALL organisations and government to work together, in the wake of the informal adult learning White Paper, 'to give a new energy and a new life to all the ways in which people choose to learn in society'. The White Paper, due for publication in the next few weeks, would set out how the Government proposed to bring this about.

#### Short courses

'Is everyone in the room misguided but you?' a lobbyist asked from the floor. 'Focusing purely on the number of short courses funded by the LSC as though that were the only measure of lifelong learning is misguided,' Mr Denham replied. 'If you look at all the activities going on out there, there is a growth of learning going on.' The lost courses, he said, 'were not courses getting people back

into work. They were valuable activities but not work-related. We've concentrated on areas of investment most likely to get people into work and to sustain them in work.' Did the Secretary of State have too mechanistic view of how people move into and out of work? 'You're right. Not everyone follows a mechanistic route but I do think that the Government needs to set some priority areas of activity, and to base those priorities on the best available evidence of what works and brings success to people, and what makes the system more flexible and responsive.' That, he continued, was why the Government was publishing its White Paper. 'My response to you is not "no" but we need to take a broader way forward, recognising the different ways that people learn and the places that support them. I want there to be an expansion of opportunity to learn in all these different ways.' Robin Landman, Chief Executive of the Network for Black Professionals, urged lobbyists to work with government in seeking a new way forward. Alan Tuckett, Director of NIACE, recognised that the Government's priorities for skills and employability were

'key priorities for the country', but said that these opportunities needed to be complemented by 'learning for life more widely'. 'All kinds of informal contexts offer opportunities for learning but they are complemented by the need to have well-taught classes for adults. We haven't got the balance right. At a time when the economy is in recession we risk failing to invest for the day after tomorrow'.

#### No olive branch

Mr Denham's defence of the Government's adult learning and skills policy was robust, but many lobbyists were unhappy to hear what seemed to them to be disparagement of the learning they were defending. Patricia Richardson, of the Grove Park User Group in Lewisham, felt that he had held out no hope – 'let alone an olive branch' – for non-accredited adult education: 'He ended up being patronising, not listening and losing his temper'. Sheila Dainton, secretary of her local WEA branch, found the reference to 'Spanish for holidaymakers' to be 'at best patronising – at worst it makes a mockery of the richness and diversity of courses on offer and the seriousness of our endeavours'. Following the Secretary of State on the podium, Bob Fryer, author of the Fryer Report on widening participation in learning in healthcare, urged him 'to go back to what David Blunkett had said in *The Learning Age* and to measure the new White Paper against it'. The core values of adult learning, he said, 'were the core values to reinvigorate what is a sad and lacklustre democracy' and to rebuild 'our sense of responsibility for each other'. Tom Wilson, the TUC's Head of Organisation and Services, reminded lobbyists of the union movement's educational roots. Unions, he said, stood for a 'holistic view of education', for bread *and* roses, 'the things we need to do to survive and the reasons why we do these things'. The problems arose when politicians tried to separate the two. 'We need to be very careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater and think about the link between bread and roses. Courses can give people the soft skills, things like confidence and communication, they need to get on. Holiday Spanish can help with that as much as anything else. We need money for Train to Gain and we need money for adult learning.' The way ahead, he concluded, was to engage and debate with Government, drawing attention to all the evidence. Diana Good, Chair of the Mary Ward Centre, said that students wanted good, motivational teachers, 'not just books clubs and history societies'. 'They want access to non-accredited short courses, courses that give people a first or second chance to build up confidence to start again. Often then they will go on to take part in accredited learning.' Bringing the lobby to its close, she added: 'Supporting lifelong learning is a sign of a civilised society. To abandon it is to deprive us of a significant source of hope.'

Let us know what you think by emailing: [comment@niace.org.uk](mailto:comment@niace.org.uk)

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Conservative Shadow Secretary of State, David Willetts