

Association of Learning Providers Summer Conference: 14 July

[2,474 words]

Good morning everyone.

It often strikes me how well the people who work in all parts of adult education satisfy Aristotle's criteria for true friends – "The young they keep out of mischief; to the old they are a comfort and aid in their weakness, and those in the prime of life they incite to noble deeds".

That's true of private as well as public providers, and true of all those who offer training in the workplace as well as in the classroom. It's certainly true of ALP's membership.

I know that your members also include some further education colleges and voluntary organisations, but I think of ALP as the voice of learning in the workplace.

I've enjoyed a very positive relationship with you in Opposition, and you serve as a constant reminder to us all that a person's learning should not – and in fact, must not - stop with their first paypacket.

Indeed, a commitment to the principle of lifelong learning is the natural consequence if you believe, as I do, that everyone deserves a fair chance to get on in life and that learning can help give it to them.

It's hard to ignore if you hear, as I have heard since long before I became a Minister, learners and trainers, employers and trade unionists alike, all telling you that skills delivered in the workplace are essential for economic growth and personal progression.

And it's inescapable if you see, as this Government saw on the day it came to office, people out of work and increasingly out of hope because they had low

skills or just the wrong skills, businesses struggling because of an inadequate supply of skilled labour, and jobs going abroad as a result.

We need to enliven the British people to get on and progress in their jobs. I see the business of Government very much as a consultative process, and you are our eyes and ears out in the workplace. You are the experts who know how it should be done and how it can be done.

Today, I want to talk to you about some of the ways in which the coalition government will try to build a truly lifelong learning system which may be of particular interest to ALP and its members. And I want to set these in the context of the financial challenges that we currently face.

The easiest way for politicians to show that they care about a particular area of policy is to throw money at it – some think the larger the payout, the deeper the commitment. And, in recent years, some aspects of publicly-funded adult learning have certainly seen their coffers swell as a result of that approach.

If this Government means to show, as we do, that we in our turn have a genuine commitment to further education, then just splashing out is no longer an option. Like the Archbishop of Canterbury in *Henry V*, we have to realise that “miracles are ceased/ And therefore we must needs admit the means/ How things are perfected”.

To judge by the number of invitations I receive, there is a fashion at the moment for conferences and seminars with titles like “How to do more with less” in the context of ensuring cost-effectiveness. And we all know it’s true that, while public spending is under pressure more severe than it has known for a generation, the demands on public services continue to grow rather than shrink.

I can’t pretend that we are not going to have to take some hard decisions about where our priorities lie, stopping some activities so that others may not just continue, but grow, and may indeed carry on growing.

As we seek to develop a new strategy for skills, as we will be doing over the next few months, we'll be trying to do something similar, sorting the show from the substance and seeking to distinguish activities that look good but achieve little from those that have real impact on the lives of real people.

Over a period of years in Opposition and in government, I've stressed the importance of the social and cultural, as well as economic impact that continuing to educate adults brings to individuals and whole communities. And my determination to see learning for its own sake flourish as never before in this country remains undiminished.

But especially when we speak of training in the workplace, economic considerations are clearly hard to ignore.

For example, as the Government works to promote renewed growth, it's obviously more important than ever that the full influence of further education is felt on the transformation of local economies. You must all know from your own experiences that this influence is potentially incredibly great.

That is why the Government recently invited proposals for local enterprise partnerships that will work in close cooperation with colleges and training organisations.

You have extensive knowledge of employer skills demand, and are therefore well placed to help the partnerships to develop their economic priorities. The measures that my colleagues and I are already putting in place to cut the bureaucratic burdens on training providers and free them to use their own initiative will help in that, and we will add to those measures freedom to innovate by cutting bureaucratic burdens on training providers.

And since, as Macaulay said, "the object of oratory alone is not truth, but persuasion", there are a number of things that I would like to try to persuade you to do in that context.

For example, I would like you to develop effective networks that will enable you to offer your local enterprise partnership a coordinated view of the economic priorities for the area, and to agree how you can help them to respond to those priorities.

The foundation-stone of your economic contribution is the teaching of practical skills. Not just random skills, but the skills needed to get local jobs with good prospects. And not just teaching skills, but teaching them well, so that every working day gives people the right to take pride in their own achievements.

And this Government believes that the best way to teach the practical skills that employers need to the required quality is through Apprenticeships. We need to look at the length, content and quality of Apprenticeships as we seek to inspire learners.

ALP members provide more Apprenticeship training than anyone else and it follows that you are central to the success or failure of our efforts.

Of course, it's easy for those of us with a more sentimental cast of mind to be seduced by, as it were, the imprint of the potter's thumb. We forget at our peril that while, at least at some level, all art is craft, not all craft is art. Indeed, what right have they who spend their lives sitting in offices to idealise physical labour and manual dexterity.

Apprenticeships are often thought of as old, but they are also about new and future ideas. And I still firmly believe that there is no less nobility in mastering a skill than there is, say, in learning to understand why space is curved.

Skills and those who master them deserve to be celebrated no less than the French subjunctive and those who learn to use it properly.

The coalition Government has already shown in its actions that it views Apprenticeships as the central pillar of its approach to vocational skills. You'll know that we are redirecting £150 million of funding this year to create 50,000

new high-quality Apprenticeship places. And we see ALP members as vital to the delivery of these extra places.

In particular, we want to expand Apprenticeships at Level 3 and there are good reasons to do so. Evidence shows that people who gain an Apprenticeship at Level 3 are likely to receive, on average, nearly a fifth higher again than those qualified up to Level 2.

The key challenge continues to be to get employers on board in offering Apprenticeship places.

I know that you see some obstacles in the way of that, and that one of the most important is the impending removal of Key Skills from Apprenticeships and their replacement with Functional Skills. I have always been clear that this is a consultative process and we must take your views seriously.

I have listened to your views on this and I find some of them very persuasive. It is important that we get this right, and I want to take the time over the summer to consider the issues you've raised. So I am pleased to be able to announce this morning that, as a result, the use of Key Skills in Apprenticeship Frameworks will be extended until March next year. This will allow providers the choice of offering either Functional Skills or Key Skills in the interim.

I should stress that this is a temporary measure to allow more flexibility for providers and more time for us to work together to get the implementation right. I know that many providers will be finalising their preparations for delivery of Functional Skills from April 2011. They should still identify and access the support they need to develop their capacity to deliver Functional Skills, with which the Learning and Skills Improvement Service can help.

The message is clear: it must be a priority for us to work together to build capacity and to decide what is best for the future.

I would also strongly encourage those of you who are ready to deliver Functional Skills from September 2010 to go ahead and do so, as this will give apprentices the opportunity to develop these highly-valued skills.

Of course, the need for reform goes much wider than Apprenticeships. There is much important work to do on other types of workplace training. For example, while Train to Gain needs to be dismantled, workplace learning must continue to be nurtured – for example, to ensure that businesses have the skilled workforces they need to grow and employees have the opportunity to progress.

We must also help to integrate further education more closely into its local environment – social as well as economic. We can make it more efficient and less bureaucratic. We can offer adults more, better and more relevant learning opportunities.

We can do much more. And we will.

Skills are a priority for my department and for my Government. But ultimately whether to learn and what learning to choose will remain a matter of individual choice. And all of these things I've been talking about this morning will fail to deliver fully on their promise unless we make sure people have the information they need to make the right choices for them.

Because by informing people, we simultaneously empower them. And that's something from which everyone – providers and employers as well as learners – benefits.

That's the thinking behind the Next Step service, which will be launched in August. It will aim to give everyone access to the best information, advice and resources to make more effective choices about skills, careers, work and life.

Individual providers also have an important role to play in empowering learners. They can do their bit as well to ensure that learners and employers to still get good quality, comparable information about exactly what's on offer.

We don't need huge bureaucracies to make this happen. Indeed, most providers already gather this type of information for their own purposes, and many publish it already. We must build on that.

I'm particularly happy that Graham Hoyle, through his position as Chair of the National Improvement Partnership Board, is taking forward the UKCES proposal to introduce a course and provider labelling system.

Having a labelling system will ensure that every provider publishes reliable information about their institution and the opportunities they provide.

Comparatively few providers have anything to fear from this approach, since more than four out of five already deliver satisfactory or better results.

For the Government's part, we will maintain and continue to build a light-touch approach. But I have asked the Skills Funding Agency to ensure they take swift action where they identify any unsatisfactory provision.

Either prompt improvement will follow, or public funding will be removed and reinvested in providers who can deliver to the standards learners and employers expect and deserve.

Nevertheless, and even though today is Bastille Day, I don't want to end my remarks, as it were, in the shadow of the guillotine.

So instead, as we mark the anniversary of one revolution, I'll end by reminding you all that we stand on the threshold of another.

The areas on which I've concentrated this morning will clearly figure prominently in the new skills strategy to which I've already referred, but so will others that will be of particular interest to ALP members.

For example, we need to think about the right form of public support for non-Apprenticeship workplace training after Train to Gain. I would welcome more thoughts on this subject, and on how to encourage progression and interchange between the different styles of formal and informal learning.

It will make it much easier to get the right answers to some difficult questions if bodies like ALP are prepared to share their opinions, experience and expertise. And that is something for which I'll be asking sooner rather than later.

And now if you have any questions I'll do my best to answer them.

Thank you.