

Cuts to UK Infrastructure under the UK Government elected in 2010

The UK experienced a new Westminster Government in May 2010, including the Conservative Party and a junior coalition partner, the Liberal Democrat (LibDem) Party. These parties were elected on a platform to address the UK financial deficit (of around £180 billion), with varying policies on domestic and overseas issues, including the Conservative Big Society agenda to reduce state services in the place of voluntary civic activities and LibDem emphasis on societal fairness, including a commitment for the abolition of University tuition fees in England.

Since the May 2010 election the Coalition has enacted a Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) across all Government departments, with the aim to reduce the UK deficit (by around £80 billion over the lifetime of the Parliament) and implement associated Government policy.

Key outcomes of the CSR have included a combination of legislation and emergency budget measures, including:

- Welfare cuts, including reduction of disability and incapacity benefits, rise of state pension age from 65 to 66 by 2020 and Public Sector pension increases.
- Expected loss of around 500,000 public sector jobs over the lifetime of the Parliament.
- Abolition or merger of many advisory and regulatory bodies such as the Regional Development Agencies, Health Protection Agency, UK Film Council, Investors in People, LearnDirect, Museums Libraries and Archives Council and other well known agencies funded by Government.
- Radical reduction in NHS services and structures, such as abolition of the health regulators and emergency coordination services, loss of around 60,000 NHS managers, loss of the NHS Direct phone line and plans to largely transfer the running of the NHS from Strategic Health Authorities to General Practitioner surgeries.
- Reduction in local authority budgets by around 40% over 3 years with reductions or closures of many services, including widespread public library closures, widespread reduction and closures of mental health services, social services and other community services such as respite provision for carers.
- Reduction of funding for charities and other voluntary groups by around £13 billion.
- Reductions or closure of regional development and investment schemes.
- Loss of many services to young people such as the 'Activity Agreement' to tackle youth unemployment and inactivity, the Connexions free careers service and the Young Person's Guarantee (to work or training at 18-24).
- Closure or reduction of all housing development schemes.
- Closure of school buildings projects and maintenance budgets.
- Threat to close or reduce the Surestart (infant child care) service.
- Ministry of Defence Cuts of around 8%.
- Reduction or loss of young and elderly people's transport concessions.
- The abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), providing up to £30 a week to means-tested young people in Further Education, often used for travel and course books.

- The increase of maximum chargeable University tuition fees from around £3,000 to £9,000 in England and introduction of interest payments on student loans (in contrast to a range of grants and lower fees present in other regional countries, such as Wales and Scotland).
- An expected 80% reduction in funding for Universities and other cuts to UK research.

The implications of the above cuts are already making a deep impact on UK society and industry with many of these cuts having implications for education, the role of libraries and deeper societal wellbeing.

The meritocratic traditions of the UK, built up since the mid 20th Century with previously good access to statutory education and Higher Education has been put at risk by the abolition of the EMA allowance (detering young people from continuing in education or training), the creation of a vocationalized state education system operated for profit by the new 'Academy' schools and a massive reduction in University funding, including the tripling of University fees in England (albeit repayable on the acquisition of work paying around £20K). The cuts to education are also worsened by the abolition of careers advice and support services for young people, and many youth employment schemes.

The cuts to local authorities of around 40% will see a reduction for a wide range of local services, this is particularly damaging given the abolition of many national agencies such as LearnDirect which provided qualifications, leadership and funding for local educational facilities at a range of levels. Libraries and other education services are widely expected to face widespread reduction or closure as a result of these changes. In addition to central cuts for charities, local authorities and councils will also be forced to reduce or abolish regional funding for charities and voluntary groups, many of which provide essential community and social services such as the mental health charity MIND.

Public library services are at particular risk of closure or service reductions, as shown in a recent Guardian poll of local authorities:

North Yorkshire is considering reducing its 42 libraries to 18 over four years, while Leeds is proposing to axe 20 smaller libraries. Cornwall, Brent, Lewisham, Hammersmith and Fulham, Richmond, Barnsley and Warrington are also planning closures. In Buckinghamshire, 14 libraries could become volunteer-run; in Gloucestershire, 12 will be closed if volunteers do not step forward. Camden, Westminster, Oldham, Southampton and Cambridgeshire are among the councils whose plans include greater use of volunteer staff. (The Guardian 22/11//10)

Whilst the LibDem coalition partners have campaigned for many years to oppose trends such as increased University fees, we now see this parliamentary party supporting the triple University fee and abolition of the EMA, not to mention de-regulation of the statutory education sector under the flagship 'Free Schools' (operated from non-traditional locations by unqualified volunteers) and Academies which threaten to reverse schooling some 60 years, back to a class-based vocational experience with a newly proposed leaving age at 14.

The Coalition cuts detailed above are cited as being necessary to reduce the UK budget deficit, but we should remember that the UK is still struggling with a global recession and this is possibly the worst time to cut both services and ensure the loss of hundreds of thousands of state sector jobs, including the many private sector jobs and companies relying on these services for contracts.

Furthermore, many of the cuts detailed above are over-shadowed by seemingly ad-hoc and substantive spends such as the recent £8 billion bank bailout to Ireland, the ongoing cost of war in Afghanistan, Trident and other nuclear weapons projects, costing hundreds of billions of pounds, and other multi-billion prestige spends such as the ongoing Olympic Stadium project.

The 'liaises faire' ideological nature of the cuts, rather than the practical necessity of deficit reduction is clearly illustrated in the tandem policy of the Big Society, focused on encouraging citizens to volunteer to create or run services, including schools, libraries and other facilities. The Government has promised to allow fast-track approval for these ventures to remove obstacles such as planning permission or requirements for qualified staffing (as shown in the recent education Act enabling non-qualified teachers for 'Free Schools').

Government reforms to de-regulate or abolish areas such as standard curricula driven education, NHS infrastructure or public standards agencies reflect not a desire for libertarianism or personal freedoms, but a basic abolition of official management by the Government, driven by the emerging Neoliberal, hyper-capitalist ideology of current Government coalition partners.

These ideologically motivated cuts must also be seen in context to soaring UK taxes, as evidenced by the recent VAT rise (UK 'Value Added Tax' on many retail products).

It should also be noted that many of these changes reflect global trends as countries struggle to survive financially during the global recession. Furthermore, this global trend in service reduction reflects an ideological agenda to liberalize, de-regulate and open public service sectors to competition and corporate control, as seen in recent World Trade Organisation and EU treaties on trade liberalisation (e.g. GATS – the General Agreement on Trade in Services). For example, we are also seeing a similar agenda of massive cuts to Library services in the United States (see: http://www.cla-net.org/weblog/2011/01/cla_presidents.php).

It remains to be seen exactly how these cuts will effect UK society and the infrastructure of libraries and education sectors over the next 4 years, but it is likely the consequences will be damaging and potentially irreversible. There will be challenges for all information sectors, professionals and activists to ensure the quality and breadth of support for our users and students in the coming years.

Selected References:

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