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ELECTION OVER, BREXIT NEXT. BUT, WHAT IS THE FUTURE FOR CAREER GUIDANCE?



TRISTRAM HOOLEY
LOOKS TO THE
FUTURE OF OUR
PROFESSION

We have, it seems, been cursed to live in interesting times. 2019 was one of the most politically interesting, surprising and downright weird years that I've ever lived through. Remember Theresa May and all of the fun that she had in the House of Commons? There was a European election which was won by Nigel Farage, a Tory leadership election, a new Prime Minister, and then an explosive and divisive election which resulted in a Conservative government. Next year we've been promised that Brexit is going to get done (but we all know that this isn't true) and we'll have new leaders for the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats. Life certainly isn't dull. But what do these political shenanigans mean for the careers sector?

Since the 2017 election we haven't really had a functioning government. All attention was on Brexit and very little happened beyond that. For an area like career education and guidance, this has meant that nothing much has changed for a long while. A period of stability is not necessarily a bad thing, but we are now in a different situation. So, what is going to happen next?

Where are we?

Any assessment about where we are going needs to begin with some thinking about where we are. There is a lot that could be said about the current state of careers provision in England, but I'll try and summarise as briefly as possible.

Within the school and college system we have a good framework (the Gatsby Benchmarks), a system of local and national support through the Careers & Enterprise Company and evidence that both the quality of provision is improving and the careers workforce, particularly in the form of Careers Leaders is growing. However, progress has been slow and there is clearly not enough money in the system to deliver all of the Gatsby Benchmarks or address issues of quality assurance. There are problems in areas like Benchmark 8 (personal guidance) where a completely different scale of resources is needed. We could describe the situation as the 'right policy, wrong size' to recognise the sound foundations and the progress that has been made, whilst also being clear that the promise of the current system won't be fulfilled without more money.

Outside of schools the picture is much patchier. We have good provision in many universities, a National Careers Service for adults, and the (somewhat bare) bones of a good system for workers through UnionLearn, but access to career support is far from universal. Many people have no idea how to access career services and would find their entitlement threadbare if they were able to figure it

out. Other groups, such as unemployed young people and working people who don't fit National Careers Service criteria often find that there is nothing for them.

So, the new government inherits a careers system that has some strengths, but also a lot of weaknesses. This includes the fact that it is an incomprehensible crazy paving of different schemes and initiatives rather than a coherent system and the fact that all parts of it are underfunded in relation to what it is tasked to do.

What did the Conservatives promise in the election?

The current system is largely the result of a decade of Conservative Party rule which has seen governments run by that party develop the National Careers Service and the Careers & Enterprise Company. This should give us some hope of stability in relation to the future of the system as we will be able to avoid the 'not one of ours' syndrome that has affected much policy making in Britain. But, beyond an overarching sense that things will stay the same, the details are unclear.

Normally, we could look to the winning party's manifesto to see what they had in mind.

But... the Conservative Party manifesto was amazingly light on details. Apart from one surprising promise to improve access to career guidance for people with disabilities, the Conservative Party has literally nothing to say about how it will manage careers. So we are left guessing...

What will they actually do?

Given the limited clues offered by the manifesto I would bet that there are no plans to change anything. Most of the existing commitments to the field, such as those found in the Careers Strategy run out in 2020, so there is some cause for concern. The more paranoid amongst us may fear that the end of the Careers Strategy period may be used to quietly close things down, reduce funding and walk away from careers.

More optimistically, it may be that the existing system is just rolled on for another few of years, pretty much as it is, while Brexit continues to dominate government. If I was a betting man, I'd say that this is the most likely possibility and that the next three years will be very like the last three years.

If we wanted to be even more optimistic it would be possible to argue that Brexit opens up the possibility for some renegotiation of the current settlement on careers. Withdrawing from the Europe Union invites us to think about how Britain finds the skills that it needs without



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free movement of European labour. The politics of Brexit raises issues around social justice and the geography of opportunity. When politicians think about these kinds of things they often come round to considering career guidance as part of their plans.

What should they do?

In summary, we don't have a very clear idea of what the next few years will bring for the careers field. It is easy to imagine best case and worse case scenarios, but in all likelihood without some pressure, things will probably stay much the same as they were.

Before the election, the Career Development Institute worked with a range of other key organisations in the careers sector to release a manifesto. In it we argued that the next government should:

1. Set out and implement a strategy for lifelong career development.
2. Start career education earlier.
3. Drive forward the 'Gatsby revolution' that has been started in secondary schools and colleges.
4. Place career development at the heart of post-compulsory education.
5. Ensure that career development support is available to all young people, including those not in school or college, and to all adults both in work and out of work.

There is a desperate need for those who care about the sector to get behind these demands and engage with the political system to drive them forward. Career education and guidance is a powerful tool to improve the lives of people. I hope that this government will realise that creating a world-class career guidance system should be at the heart of its vision for post-Brexit Britain.

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