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THE PUBLIC MORALITY

Well before the election, and therefore before the leadership of the Conservative party had become an immediate issue, Sir Keith Joseph was pondering a series of political speeches in which he would reassess Conservative principles and attitudes in the context of the day. His speech at Preston on inflation, unemployment and the money supply was one of the series. His speech at Birmingham on "the family and civilized values" is another.

The second of these speeches does not possess the intellectual rigour of the first, but it has other virtues. It challenges the primacy that politicians have awarded to economics. This is not the best moment to make that challenge effective, just when the economy of this state and the international system in which it is enmeshed are in danger of spinning out of control. But the grounds on which the challenge is based are of permanent importance: that "the economic situation is not an independent variable"; it reflects the condition of political life and of opinion; and these in turn are associated with the personal morality prevalent in society at the time. Sir Keith Joseph's strictures on prevailing attitudes in these matters are exceedingly severe—*moribus antiquis stat Roma*. One has the feeling of being addressed now by the elder Cato and now by Spiro Agnew. But the picture of decadent fashions which he paints, and their attendant consequences in social distemper, is plainly recognizable.

Sir Keith Joseph is also prepared to call in question some of the most securely entrenched policy assumptions of the times.

That is also a political virtue, though not one that is automatically rewarded with the laurels of leadership.

Whatever we may have thought fifteen years or so back, it is our right and duty to question, in the light of experience, the rapid expansion of the universities, and the belief that by increasing the number of undergraduates we necessarily multiply the benefit either to the young people concerned or to the nation.

That needs saying, not as a prelude to turning off the tap of higher education, but in order to draw from the requirement that fresh justification be given for the programme better-considered objectives for it and better-fashioned means of achieving them.

These virtues of his speech do not conceal its flaws. About one of them there has already been a hullabaloo. Sir Keith Joseph's brief excursus into eugenics was bound to raise the roof since he introduced into it distinctions of social class. If, however, attention is paid to what he had to say on the subject and not to the infelicities included in his manner of saying it, very little divides Sir Keith Joseph's interrogative advocacy of more active contraceptive services from all those who have been arguing *on social grounds* for the public extension of these services. Both he and they are saying that a high proportion of "unwanted children" become a social burden in one way or another. So it is ironical to find among the first

to denounce Sir Keith Joseph some of those who have been calling most insistently for the sort of measures he suggests.

A more serious weakness in the argument of his speech arises from its character as a party political harangue. The constellation of trends, moral fashions and self-indulgences which he denounces under the general heading of "permissiveness" he associates causally with the theory and practice of socialism. That is a very large jump to make, and only the politically captive will make it with him unseen. The ubiquity and prevalence in western society of the attitudes to which he takes exception suggest that they are of more diffused origin than can be explained by the minority political cult of socialism.

Certainly there is a case to answer in Sir Keith Joseph's charge that "the socialist method would take away from the family and its members the responsibilities [for education, health, saving for old age, housing] which give it cohesion", and that personal morality would thereby be affected. But the changes in personal morality and thence in the public character of society which policies of that sort might be expected to make have to be examined with some care before they can reasonably be used for the wholesale condemnation of socialism from a moral point of view. It is not evident that encouragement of "permissiveness" is one of those changes. After all, in the most socialist countries, the "people's democracies", authority is least indulgent towards what is here complained of.