

CONSERVATIVE POLICY ON EDUCATION AND THE ARTS

(A paper by Mr. St. John Stevas)

Themes

1. The twin themes of our education policy are the raising of standards of discipline and learning from school to university and the extension of parental influence and choice. Those who send their children to maintained schools - for which they are paying by rates and taxes - are entitled to satisfaction just as are those who pay for education privately. These themes accord with the traditional principles of Conservative policy: the pursuit of excellence, concern for order and liberty, support for the family, and reliance on individual initiative as well as on intervention by the State.

2. Despite the apparent shift in the Government's area of concern from structures to standards there has been little change in their actual policies. Their vendetta against the grammar and independent schools continues. Moreover, they are taking no effective action to raise standards and Mrs. Williams has failed to convince her Cabinet colleagues of the need for legislation on parental choice of school - her position on parents' rights in this respect appears to be weakening. The field thus remains open to us.

Local Authorities, Parents and Schools

3. We believe that local education authorities should, as far as possible, have the freedom to decide on the organisation of schools in their area. We shall therefore repeal those sections of the 1976 Education Act which forced all local authorities to go fully comprehensive, thus allowing them to concentrate the available resources on improving existing schools rather than introducing makeshift comprehensive schemes. At the same time we shall make it clear that schemes for reorganisation should retain good schools of proven worth and only on this basis would they be confirmed by a Conservative Secretary of State.
4. We shall restore to local authorities their freedom to take up places at independent schools.
5. At present, parental rights in choosing a school are unclear. In accordance with our Parents' Charter, we shall introduce legislation imposing clear obligations on government and local authorities to take account of the wishes of parents when allocating children to schools and giving parents a right of appeal if they are dissatisfied with the official choice. The legislation will also give parents the right to representation on school governing bodies (as recommended in the Taylor Report) and help them make their choice of school by requiring schools to publish prospectuses which include examination and other results. Rigid zoning arrangements are no longer necessary in view of the declining birth-rate and should be abolished.
6. Choice of school should not be thought of as being confined to that between comprehensives, on the one hand, and grammar or independent schools on the other. As important is the choice between different kinds of comprehensive school: single-sex or

mixed, denominational or non-denominational, traditional or experimental. Comprehensive schools should be encouraged to specialise and should be able to select the pupils most likely to excel at the schools' speciality, whether that is science, languages, swimming or woodwork.

Standards and Values

7. To raise standards in all schools, we will introduce national minimum standards in reading, writing and arithmetic for all pupils. The standards would be set by the Assessment of Performance Unit at the Department of Education and Science and tests would be devised by them in consultation with local education authorities and teachers. These tests, which would be locally administered, would be taken at appropriate ages such as 7, 11 and 14 to allow sufficient time for remedial work to be undertaken before a) transfer to secondary school and b) leaving school.
8. There are major areas of knowledge - English, maths, science, modern languages, religious education and the arts - which no child should drop before the age of 16. These should form a protected core of subjects in every secondary school. Pupils who take CSE and GCE exams - the vast majority of school-children - could be required to take at least one exam in each major study area. This would be similar to the idea of a grouped certificate at 16-plus which Mrs. Williams now seems to have abandoned.
9. While supporting a core curriculum in the sense just outlined we are opposed to central government interference in the detailed content of the curriculum.
10. We believe that every child should leave school with a knowledge of religion, a sense of values, a perception of what is right and what is wrong and an awareness of his or her social responsibilities. Parents have an important role to play here and their co-operation should be sought but schools should accept their responsibilities in this sphere.
11. An important part of children's moral development will stem from religious education, the purpose of which should be to impart knowledge of religion, to awaken young people to the spiritual dimension of life and to the possibility of making religious choice and commitment. We stand four-square behind the religious clauses of the 1944 Act - the obligation on schools to hold a daily act of worship and to provide religious instruction should remain.
12. The paramount need is to renew religious education, since the provisions of the Act will be of little use if the subject is decaying from within. We therefore propose to set up an inquiry into religious education to report within a limited period to examine the actual state of the subject in schools, its purpose today, the supply and training of teachers and to make recommendations for action. In view of the statutory responsibilities of the DES and local authorities with regard to religious education, we also propose that a representative national RE advisory body should be set up in accordance with the recommendations of the Religious Education Council.
13. Meanwhile, we are demonstrating our concern by holding a series of conferences and lectures on the theme of "Values in Education".

14. We shall make an all-out effort to raise standards of discipline and reduce levels of truancy, particularly in large inner-city comprehensives. To this end, we think that central government should require teacher training institutions to place much greater stress in initial training on the nature of discipline and to give practical instruction in classroom techniques for maintaining order. LEAs, governing bodies and headteachers should be required to give teachers clear guidelines so that they know by whom, and on what occasions, various sanctions may be used, namely suspension, withdrawal, expulsion, transfer and corporal punishment.

15. Many disciplinary problems are caused by the bored 15-year-old waiting to leave school. We believe that a more concerted effort could be made to link their last year at school with the world of work. We shall issue a circular to local authorities on careers guidance to achieve a more uniformly high standard of provision. We shall also promote "linked courses" with local further education colleges. In general, we will encourage a greater vocational bias in schools. A study group is currently examining the whole area of vocational education and training and will report back to me after Easter.

Schools

16. Nursery Schools. It is still our hope that the target set in Mrs. Thatcher's 1972 White Paper can be achieved by 1982. We shall certainly wish to expand nursery education and, within the resources available, to give special priority to deprived areas. We also believe that the development of the play groups movement should be encouraged. Play groups have the advantage of not needing large economic resources.

17. Primary Schools. Conservative education policy has traditionally emphasised the importance of the early years of schooling. The primary school population is expected to fall from a peak of 5.2 million in 1974 to 4.0 million in 1985. This will provide an opportunity to improve standards. We have long stressed the importance of 'O' level maths for future teachers if standards are to be raised and Mrs. Williams has now accepted our case. We attach great importance to remedial education at the primary stage, the need for which would be indicated by the results of our proposed tests.

18. The last Conservative Government devoted almost the whole of that part of the major building programme available for improving or replacing out-of-date schools to primary schools. Although great progress was made, a recent Government survey of schools made in 1975 and 1976 showed that a fifth of all primary places were built before 1903, more than half before 1945 and that two-fifths of primary schools were considered overcrowded. We should therefore resume the improvement programme as soon as financial circumstances permit.

19. Falling primary rolls will also provide an opportunity to accommodate many rising fives in primary schools.

20. Secondary Schools. We are committed to maintaining and encouraging a variety of secondary schools. We shall retain existing schools of proven worth such as grammar schools and consider sympathetically proposals for new selective schools.

21. Comprehensive Schools. 80 per cent of secondary school pupils now attend comprehensive schools. Although we are likely to return to power before many authorities have completed their reorganisation it is likely that most will wish to continue along that path even when compulsion is removed. Rather than unscrambling comprehensive reorganisation already carried out, we should therefore encourage local authorities to carry out practical improvements to see that comprehensive schools really do work for children of all abilities. These would include:

- reducing the size of the largest comprehensives, reorganising schools into smaller units and building smaller schools in future;
- ending split sites;
- allowing comprehensives to specialise and to select for their own speciality;
- discouraging the general use of mixed ability teaching and allowing only those staff with the requisite training to teach classes of mixed ability;
- instructing schools to introduce different curricula for different ability groups;
- moving towards streaming and setting, with particular emphasis on setting as the most flexible form of internal selection;
- discouraging a general move towards the sixth form college and keeping traditional sixth forms wherever possible, since without them schools are decapitated and it is difficult to attract good teachers.

22. We had in 1974 proposed an inquiry into comprehensive schools but so many issues have been discussed since, particularly during the "Great Debate", that we are now of the view that a general inquiry is no longer necessary. However, we should wish to examine specific aspects of comprehensive schools in the light of various inquiries, initiated by this Government, such as the curricular survey.

23. We are strongly committed to a system of public examinations which tests both the bright and the less academically able. We do not consider it possible to examine both groups by a common 16-plus examination and therefore favour the retention of different exams for the different ability ranges.

24. Assisted Places Scheme. We remain firm in our commitment to restore the direct grant ideal by means of an Assisted Places Scheme. Under this scheme, the old system of capitation and sixth-form grants will disappear and the available money from public funds will be devoted to a central government scheme for the partial or total remission of tuition fees for day pupils and boarders alike, in accordance with a generous income scale. Since all parents of modest means will be able to claim the remission of part or all of the fees direct from central government, there will be no need for any subvention by local education authorities (the former "free places"). Admission to the schools will be on a selective basis subject to the condition that a certain proportion of the entrants - probably at least 25 per cent - should be drawn from the maintained primary schools.

25. The amount of money that can be devoted to the scheme will depend on economic circumstances, but it would be essential to allocate sufficient funds to start a substantial scheme. As a rough guide, I have said that we would take the total cost of the old direct grant system in 1975-6, its last full year of operation (= £38.5 million), uprate it in line with inflation and thus arrive at the global sum within which the Assisted Places Scheme could be financed.

Meals and Transport

26. The Government subsidy on school meals and transport is at present high and there is scope for savings in this area. The subsidy on school meals will be £362 million in the current year, nearly 60 per cent of the total cost, and the cost to LEAs of school transport was estimated to be £99 million in 1976-7. We should favour giving local authorities greater discretion over school meals and transport. In the case of meals, we could:

- either devolve onto local authorities the power to decide whether to provide meals or not (this would involve legislation),
or give local authorities discretion as to charges, quality of meals etc. (this could be done by regulation).

In the case of school transport, the statutory walking distances could be abolished and local authorities allowed to provide school transport as they think fit. This would require legislation.

Teachers

27. If standards are to be raised, we consider it essential to ensure a flow of dedicated and qualified teachers into our schools, to monitor their standard of teaching and to provide them with a career structure which will keep them in the classroom. Too often in the past public statements by prominent Conservatives have been critical of teachers and the false impression has been created that the Party is in some way "anti-teacher". We should take every opportunity of showing our support for the teaching profession and our concern and sympathy for their problems. The point has important political implications - there are today about 500,000 teachers; they have considerable influence in the community; and they are severely disillusioned with the Labour Government. In particular we have an opportunity to improve relations with the Teachers Unions with whom we have been in continuous dialogue. Our theme with regard to teachers should be that of promoting greater professionalism. The creation of a General Teaching Council, to enable teachers to regulate their own professional standards, would be a major contribution in this respect.

28. Training. We think the development of in-service training should take priority over the establishment of an all-graduate profession and that there should be a reserve power to require certain teachers to attend that training. A Policy Group under Dr. Rhodes Boyson is currently examining all aspects of teacher training and will report shortly.

29. Headteachers. We believe that the importance of making good headteacher appointments cannot be over-emphasised. Appointments procedures throughout the country should therefore be overhauled under the supervision of the Secretary of State.

Further and Higher Education

30. In higher education, we adhere to the Robbins principle, which states that higher education courses should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so. The period of major expansion in the universities is over and they would now welcome an era of consolidation. Within the expansion that will be necessary to accommodate the bulge in the 18-22 age group of the mid-1980s, we therefore propose that: nearly all of this should be absorbed by the non-university sector; emphasis should be placed on increasing higher education opportunities for women; two-year courses should be expanded, (while noting that the universities will not accept a two year degree); and recurrent provision should be increased.
31. As soon as economic circumstances permit, we should return to the quinquennial grant system for the universities. We should also rectify the university lecturers' pay anomaly as soon as possible, since we consider it essential to have contented university staff if we are to have flourishing universities.
32. We believe that advanced further education should be placed under a central funding and planning agency, similar to the University Grants Committee. This would help to reduce the present proliferation and duplication of advanced courses and to discourage a drift in some polytechnics from vocational to academic courses. Through this national body, we would promote the expansion of part-time and evening provision, both because it is cost-effective and because the students' motivation is higher. Before making a detailed statement of policy we are awaiting the publication of the Oakes Report on the management of public sector higher education.
33. In non-advanced further education, we should place particular emphasis on technician courses and other provision of a strictly vocational nature. Here too we should encourage the expansion of part-time provision.
34. Student Grants. The system of student support is currently in a state of great confusion. Severe cutbacks in local authority spending are hitting discretionary awards particularly hard at a time when the Manpower Services Commission is offering unemployed school-leavers generous allowances to follow short-term skill-orientated courses. There is thus no incentive for young people to follow longer-term further education courses which may or may not qualify for a grant, when they know that, after six weeks of unemployment, they are eligible for the generous MSC schemes.
35. We are pledged to conduct a thorough review of student grants and, in that review, to give priority to the reduction of the parental contribution. I would like us to give a pledge of eventual abolition of the parental contribution since this would benefit many of our supporters and at the same time bring us in new recruits from the middle and professional classes. The cost has been estimated by the Government at just over £100 million in the current academic year. We should also extend the categories of eligibility for mandatory awards, particularly for 16-19 year olds following vocational further education courses. The grants system has developed with a bias against non-advanced vocational courses.

Particular Problems

36. Future of ILEA. After our meeting with GLC Councillors on 26th January, 1977 and a further meeting on 1st March this year, agreement was reached that it would be desirable if the ILEA were to be abolished and educational powers returned to the Boroughs, with special arrangements (if necessary) for further education. The initiative could be taken by the GLC who have undertaken to put forward proposals for legislation to the Shadow Cabinet. Meanwhile, we are awaiting the publication of the Marshall Report and the clearance of the Shadow Cabinet before making a public statement of policy.
37. Reform of Schools Council. We have repeatedly argued that the Schools Council, which is overwhelmingly teacher-dominated, should be reformed to give greater representation to parents, industry and other outside interests. The reforms currently proposed are unsatisfactory, since the new structure would be cumbersome and would give little representation to either parents or industry. We shall therefore review the structure in Government.

The Arts

38. The arts are of minimal importance in terms of public expenditure (total government expenditure on the arts in 1977-8 is only £112 million, out of a total DES vote of £8 billion) yet they are of considerable political significance since the arts constituency is influential. Mrs. Thatcher summed up the point economically in a letter sent to Lord Gibson in July 1976:
- "I can say, however, that I don't believe in the present economic situation it will make sense for any Government to look for candle-end economies which will yield a very small saving, whilst causing upset out of all proportion to the economies achieved. Public expenditure savings directed at the arts would come into this category and would not make any significant reduction in our borrowing requirement.
- "In view of this, I can assure you that we will continue to support the arts, though the precise level of expenditure and the rate at which it can be increased must inevitably depend on the economic situation we inherit".
39. The device of having a "Minister for the Arts" has not worked well in recent years and the post is not popular with the arts world. Their concern is that the Arts would have a direct voice in the Cabinet. Cabinet representation is, in fact, achieved through the presence of the Secretary of State for Education in the Cabinet who has ultimate responsibility for the arts and we recommend that this should be recognised by changing the name of the department, and the title of the Secretary of State so that it included "The Arts", e.g. Department of Education, Science and the arts. This would have the further merit of symbolising the importance we attach to the arts.
40. We remain committed to the introduction of a Public Lending Right financed out of central government funds.

41.

We shall publish a discussion document outlining our policy on the arts in June this year and this will be discussed at a conference on the arts to be held in London in July. The Conference should be a useful contribution to maintaining public activity in what tends to be an off period. It is our hope that Mrs. Thatcher might open the conference, thus giving expression to the importance we attach to this area of policy.