

Sir Keith Joseph denies bid for Tory leadership as critics mount attack

Sir Keith Joseph denied yesterday that his major speech in Birmingham on Saturday had been intended as a bid for the leadership of the Conservative Party. Such speculation was rubbish, he said.

Sir Keith's comments on birth control and its application

among "socio-economic classes four and five" have sparked a tinderbox of reaction, most of it hostile. He admitted yesterday that he had been naive and should have devoted a separate speech to the subject; he had said nothing new, however, he claimed.

The speech, which called for the "remoralization" of Britain, has been widely interpreted, however, as an attempt to swing the party to the right (Our Political Correspondent writes). It has been praised by several backbench Tory MPs.

Speech seen as attempt to swing party to right

By George Clark
Political Correspondent

Surprised by the reaction to his major speech at Birmingham on Saturday, Sir Keith Joseph, shadow Home Secretary, yesterday denied that it had been in any way intended as an attempt to gain support in the struggle for the leadership of the Conservative Party should Mr Heath decide to step down.

He said that he was amazed that the speech should have been seen in that light; he had dealt with social problems about which he had been talking continually for the past four years. To say it had something to do with the leadership was rubbish.

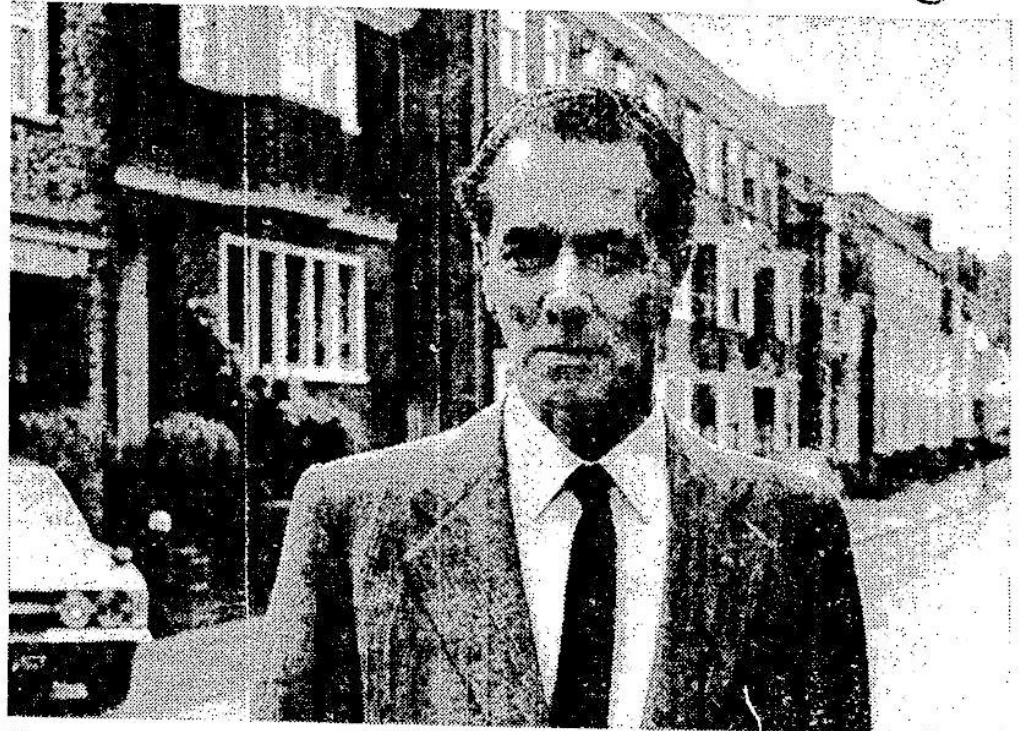
That is his view, which everyone will respect; but yesterday the speech was welcomed by many Conservatives as "refreshing" and a thoughtful attempt to bring the party back to a reconsideration of its basic philosophy. It is the second major declaration to come from Sir Keith since he and a group of other Conservatives set out in the spring to review the party's policies and its approach to society and economics.

The speech was being widely interpreted as an attempt to swing the party behind more right-wing policies, although some regrets were expressed about the passage in which Sir Keith referred to "our stock being threatened" by the higher birthrate among poor families and parents of low intelligence.

One Conservative MP—not among those demanding a change in the leadership—thought that that passage was likely to be misinterpreted and used as a stick to beat the Tories in the same way as part of Sir Keith's speech on the economy on September 5 had been "misused" by Labour, which suggested that he was advocating increased unemployment.

Sir Keith found the reaction to his comments on birth control disturbing. He said in a radio interview yesterday that he thought in retrospect that he had made a mistake in trying to cover too many subjects in one speech.

"I was saying that people who believe in the older values and older standards tend to have given way, step by step, before the onslaught of those who believe in a permissive society and that as a result we now have a society with more misery, more violence, more



Sir Keith Joseph outside his home in Mulberry Walk, Chelsea, yesterday.

child neglect and cruelty and less responsibility . . . the biggest task we face is to reargue the case for higher standards of responsibility in family life", he said.

The section which has caused most controversy was about the population trend:

The balance of our population, our human stock is threatened. A recent article in *Poverty*, published by the Child Poverty Action Group, showed that a high and rising proportion of children are being born to mothers least fitted to bring children into the world and bring them up. They are born to mothers who were first pregnant in adolescence in socio-economic classes four and five. Many of these girls are unmarried, many are deserted or divorced or soon will be. Some are of low intelligence, most of them of low educational attainment. They are unlikely to be able to give children the stable emotional background, the consistent combination of love and firmness which are more important than riches.

They are producing problem children, the future unmarried mothers, delinquents, denizens of our borstals, subnormal educational establishments, prisons and hostels for drifters.

If nothing was done, Sir Keith said, the nation would move towards degeneration, however much resources were poured into preventative work

and the overburdened educational system.

He had talked of girls in the lowest socio-economic classes, four and five, because those groups made far less use of birth control than others did. Proposals to extend birth control facilities to these classes, particularly young unmarried girls, the potential young unmarried mothers, evoked entirely understandable moral opposition.

"Is it not condoning immorality? I suppose it is", Sir Keith said. "But which is the lesser evil, until we are able to remoralize whole groups and classes of people, undoing the harm done when already weak restraints on strong instincts are further weakened by permissiveness in television, in films, on bookstalls?"

On his past record, Sir Keith may find himself under strong fire from Mrs Castle, his successor as Secretary of State for Social Services, and other politicians (including some Conservatives) for the attitude he adopted when legislation dealing with a comprehensive family planning service was before Parliament in 1973.

Confronted by a revolt in the Lords, which amended the Bill to make it a free service, Sir Keith and the Conservative

Government insisted that although family planning advice should be free the appliances should be subject to prescription charges.

As Mr John Cronin, Labour MP for Loughborough, pointed out in a letter to *The Times* later, 10 Conservatives voted against the Government and 54 more signed a motion calling on the Government to allow a completely free service. But the prescription charge stayed, even after the Bishop of Bath and Wells had called attention to the need for the service among those aged under 16.

When Labour came to power, Mrs Castle announced that the service would be free and available to all women and girls regardless of age or marital status. Some Labour backbenchers said yesterday that if Sir Keith felt so deeply about the need to give family planning services to young, unmarried girls and the poor, he should have fought for one to be provided, and could have resigned from the Government to call attention to the matter.

Mrs Castle is expected to make a major speech in reply to certain parts of Sir Keith's speech.

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