

LEADER'S STEERING COMMITTEE

56TH MEETING

Minutes of the 56th Meeting held at 5.00 pm.
on Monday, 3rd April 1978, in the Leader's
Room at the House of Commons.

Present: Mrs. Thatcher (in the Chair)

Sir Keith Joseph, Lord Carrington,
Lord Thorneycroft, Sir Geoffrey Howe,
Mr. Pym, Sir Ian Gilmour,
Mr. Peyton, Mr. Maude.

Mr. Atkins.

In attendance: Mr. St. John Stevas, Dr. Boyson,
Dr. Hampson, Mr. Lawson,
Mr. Patten, Mr. Ridley,
Mr. Nicholson, Miss Passmore.

Apologies: Mr. Whitelaw, Mr. Prior, Mr. Davies.

Education

Mr. St. John Stevas introduced his paper, 'Conservative Policy on Education and the Arts' LCC(78)67, and indicated the changes that had been made in the light of the previous discussion. There was a discussion and the following points were agreed:

(i) Our emphasis throughout was that a very large amount of money was being spent on education, more than at any time in the past, yet the results showed, if anything, a declining success for the system. We should seek to get value for money and ensure greater accountability.

(ii) There was increasing evidence to suggest that there was no special link between small classes and higher educational standards. It was often easier to use formal methods of teaching where there were larger classes. One of the most important factors in declining standards was the preoccupation of senior staff in the giant comprehensives with administrative work which led to classes being taken by younger, less experienced, teachers. We should insist on senior staff doing a certain amount of teaching regularly and point this fact out in our argument against larger schools.

(iii) In considering vocational guidance and vocational training for schoolchildren and school leavers, we should remember that there existed a Youth Employment Service throughout the country, and it was vital that this should be fully co-ordinated with careers advice in the schools.

(iv) We should investigate the pressures and the ultimate administrative sanctions we could bring to bear, if need be, on Local Education Authorities who were not prepared to present proposals for improvement to a Conservative Secretary of State. We should recognise that while it was not possible to unscramble well-established "all-in" comprehensive systems, LEAs could seek to do of if their establishment was recent and incomplete.

(v) We should try to avoid the use of the word "selection", and talk more about "opening up the career to talent" and fitting pupils into schools with appropriate reference to their different ages, abilities and aptitudes. We were concerned with identifying and assisting different talents not only between schools but actually within schools.

(vi) We should recognise that once publication of examination and test results for various age groups was widely practised we would be well along the road to ensuring that pressure would begin to be brought to bear to improve standards.

(vii) In paragraph 8 of the paper we should change the burden of proof: parents should only be denied their choice of school if the LEA could prove that it would cost too much or if there were other good reasons. We should examine the legislation passed by the last Conservative Government to see if it provided for parents to appeal to local tribunals over allocation of schools. We wished, generally, to allow appeals against rigid zoning arrangements, which should be abolished, and our proposals to amend the transport licencing laws should help to provide more schools transport at reasonable prices.

(viii) It was important to carry out a pilot scheme on the educational voucher idea.

(ix) We should recognise that there was evidence that the quality, as well as the number, of H.M. Inspectors had declined. The view that the Inspectorate was showing a bias in permitting "progressive" education, and even Leftist experiments might be met by the argument that the Inspectorate merely reflected the political atmosphere of the time. We should seek to change that political atmosphere and thus the attitudes of the Inspectorate.

(x) We should recognise that if HMI's had to investigate a schools, this was a serious reflection on the incapacity of the local inspectorate.

(xi) Each education authority should have one of each type of school inspected every year, and should seek to build up a bank of information based on the experience gained.

(xii) Regarding paragraph 17 in the paper, we should seek to discover if there had been a report by the Inspectorate on religious education. On the whole, we were reluctant to have more inquiries and a further advisory council.

(xiii) We were firmly opposed to changing the law on religious education and we should seek to enforce the existing law while having regard to the difficulties.

(xiv) We recognised that we needed legislation to carry out the proposal in paragraph 21 of the paper.

(xv) We favoured separate morning and afternoon sessions in nursery schools so as to avoid overhead costs for lunch. We should recognise that we should not be able, for some years, to spend more money on nursery schools.

(xvi) Regarding further and higher education, we were reluctant to set up a further administrative body, such as proposed in paragraph 40 of the paper, unless there was overwhelming evidence for the desirability of doing so.

The discussion of this paper and on Mr. Lawson's paper, 'Public Expenditure on Education' LSC(78)68, would be concluded at a further meeting.

The meeting closed at 7.00 p.m.