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RENEWING THE VALUES OF SOCIETY

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE MID-80s

"Our country's relative decline is not inevitable. We in the Conservative Party think we can reverse it, not because we think we have all the answers but because we think we have the one answer that matters most. We want to work with the grain of human nature, helping people to help themselves - and others. This is the way to restore that self-reliance and self-confidence which are the basis of personal responsibility and national success."

Conservative Manifesto, 1979

[This Government came to power asserting that it is the exercise of responsibility which teaches self-discipline. But in the early stages of life, it is the experience of authority, when exerted fairly and consistently by adults, which teaches young people how to exercise responsibility themselves. We have to learn to take orders before we learn how to give them.

This two-way relationship between obedience and responsibility is what makes a free, self-governing society. And in the breakdown of that relationship we can trace the origins of so much that has gone wrong with Britain.]

If we can rebuild this relationship, we might begin to restore also:

- respect for law and order
- respect for property
- respect for teachers and parents.

But the rebuilding itself has to be a two-way business.

On the one hand, we need to restore effective authority to teachers and parents.

On the other hand, we need to offer young people a taste of responsibility and a useful role in society.

This selection of ideas - some new, some old - is designed to stimulate both action and argument. Several schemes are already

successful as local experiments; these might be carried forward on a national basis. Others are more provocative and speculative. The presentation is not intended to be systematic; nor are the suggestions meant to add up to a detailed programme of action. The aim is to direct attention to those places where a Government might usefully intervene and assist to renew the values of society.

Considering these ideas all together, and inviting each relevant Department to see what it can do to help, may be the best way to convince both political and public opinion that we are neither callous nor defeatist about the practical prospects for the next generation.

Timing

- (i) The programme could be publicly launched in the autumn, perhaps at Brighton.
- (ii) Specific subjects could then be discussed at a seminar, or series of seminars before Christmas.
- (iii) Some proposals could then be implemented, one by one, over the remainder of this Parliament. But with other proposals, we can start straight away.
- (iv) The rest of the programme could be embodied in the Manifesto for the next 5 years.

Children first

We start with children and the schools they go to, because that is where most of our anxieties begin. But if we are to succeed in re-implanting the values we believe in, we shall be drawn into far-reaching reforms of adult society as well.

AT SCHOOL

1. Teacher-training might be reformed in order to include a compulsory course on "management of the classroom" and to insist on "staff college" training for all head teachers and Chief Education Officers. It is inexcusable that teachers, instead of reinforcing parental authority, should undermine that authority, not merely by anti-authority teaching, but by simply not knowing how to keep order.
2. Parents cannot be respected as holders of authority and dispensers of wisdom unless they are seen by their children to be in control. And as far as children are concerned, the place to be in control of is the place where they spend 5 days a week, 9 months in the year, namely school. Parents made to wait outside school gates, patronised by teachers and education officials and denied the freedom of choice of schools, are more like beggars pleading for alms than customers exerting consumer sovereignty.

This relationship must and can be transformed. The first step might be to increase the minimum number of directly-elected parent governors provided for under the Education Act, 1980.

The second step ^{could be:} / to permit other forms of state-aided education to spring up in competition with the maintained schools; such competition already exists in most European countries and in Northern Ireland where the schools are generally agreed to have higher standards than in the rest of the UK.

The third step ^{might be} / vouchers, or education allowances, to restore genuine power of choice to those parents who have not the money to opt out of the state system, nor the articulateness and self-confidence to make their voices heard within it.

In higher education, a sense of responsibility for one's own education and an awareness of its costs can be directly inspired by a system of student loans.

3. The grammar of society. Does "civics" as taught today include all those things which it ought to include to give children a general understanding of the country they live in? How many children in comprehensive schools, for example, are taught (a) the history of the English common law; and (b) how the law works today? Lack of knowledge about our country, its traditions of civility, and its historical evolution can be as crippling a

handicap in coping with life as poor grasp of the English language. Many young people - even those with several O levels and A levels - lack any real knowledge of the grammar of society.

Could the examining boards devise a course which would include a very brief outline of the history and present-day working of (a) Parliament and Government; (b) English/Scottish law; and (c) the British economy?

This "British General" paper could provide a basic equivalent in social studies to English Language as a qualification for employment or for admission to higher and further education. Such a course might also provide at least a partial antidote to the half-baked Marxism which dupes so many 18 year olds largely because they lack other social and political knowledge to match it against.

OUT OF SCHOOL

4. School holidays. The increase in working mothers is one of the great post-War changes. In the holidays we have the all-day latch-key kid. The DHSS and the Home Office have already put forward some proposals for extra day care facilities. We must also press on with the release of school playing fields during the holidays. Should we also consider "summer schools" offering courses in various attractive skills - motor mechanics, photography, carpentry, guitar, etc? Should these various small measures be put together in a "Brighter Summer" package? Could the principle of Information Technology Centres be carried far wider - to embrace, say, language labs. and engineering skills?
5. Money management. The sensible management of pocket money, leading on to sensible management of the wage packet, is an essential part of growing up. In middle-class homes, it is taken for granted. Where parents do not have bank accounts, the habit may come less readily. I wonder whether the Post Office savings system fills the gap adequately. Is there some facility which the banks or the building societies could set up in conjunction with secondary schools - a schools equivalent of the Christmas club?

6. Vandals and delinquents. Over the past 100 years, the state has taken over many of the responsibilities for the care, education and discipline of children which used to be reserved for parents. Yet the state has never fully developed the flexibility of response which is a routine trait of a good parent. A parent's response to a child's wrongdoing ranges from "say you're sorry", to the imposition of extra household chores, sharp moral lectures and a brisk slap. Until recently, the state had a far cruder range of responses: the choice was between letting the delinquent off with a warning and imprisoning him in a variety of institutions.

We have been timid about developing in-between responses to law-breaking, particularly about those forms of punishment which involve the offender making practical restitution, either to the victim or to society. "Community service" has been introduced rather nervously in Britain for fear that it might seem soft or "Scandinavian". Yet provided that we retain imprisonment and stiff fines as conspicuous deterrents for the really vicious crimes, community service in all its forms does offer undeniable advantages:

- (a) Scrubbing down a vandalised wall or weeding a pensioner's garden is unlikely to criminalise a young offender in a way that imprisonment so often does, however hard we try to make reformatories actually reform people.
- (b) The obvious way to "integrate" a delinquent teenager into ordinary society is to keep him physically within ordinary society. Alienation, after all, means in its strictest and ultimate sense no more than "being a stranger".
- (c) The savings on public expenditure from sending fewer young people to Borstals and prisons leave money free to run those institutions as genuine places of reform.

Should we then consider urgently how far we can make community service the routine first response to minor acts of law-breaking by juveniles?

AT HOME

7. Television. The argument here starts and too often stops with the question of sex and violence. TV treatment of both is indeed often dehumanising. But another and no less important problem is the trivialising, mind-numbing effect of so much television, particularly children's television which takes up 2 hours of every afternoon.

Even those programmes which are often rightly complained of - violent crime serials and westerns - usually do at least illustrate the distinction between right and wrong and make it clear that this distinction matters. Programmes for children, by contrast, are often lifeless, moral-less, mindless and themeless. They reduce life to a meaningless buzz of chatter. No stories, no drama, no food for thought, no suspense - and not much laughter either.

We should not be frightened to suggest that unless the broadcasting authorities offer our children more nourishing stuff in the future - and that would mean spending a much higher proportion of their revenue on children's programmes - we might consider setting up a separate, adequately funded Children's Broadcasting Corporation which would do the job for them on all channels, much as ITN does now for the news for all the independent companies. Such a CBC would not be a Government stooge, nor would it be unremittingly "educational", although it might naturally include schools broadcasting. It would concentrate on the area of broadcasting which now has very low priority for funds and attention. We should emphasise throughout that we wish to make children's broadcasting more enjoyable, not less. Our aim would be to shake the BBC and the independent companies into re-ordering their priorities.

8. Home pride. All our schemes for broadening the social basis of home ownership and for self-management of council estates are highly relevant here. I mention particularly those schemes which would do most to enable the young and the poor to own a home early on in life, with all the pride and sense of responsibility that ownership generates:

- (a) Homesteading, which has worked so well in places as far apart as Glasgow and Baltimore. Should we have a national programme which would confer homesteading rights on any family occupying a dwelling which the landlord, whether private or public, refuses or cannot afford to bring up to national minimum standards?
- (b) Rent-based mortgages. A highly attractive and apparently well-costed scheme devised by Christopher Monckton of the Daily Telegraph. Under this scheme, the council tenant would have the right to convert his rent into an equivalent mortgage repayment on his home. The rent-based mortgage provides for a steady increase, index-linked, in the money level (but not the real level) of repayment, so that the repayment period is usually much the same as with a conventional mortgage. The fact that the mortgage repayment starts at the same level as the council house rent removes the daunting aspect of "getting a mortgage" and simplifies the calculations of the family budget. The payments increase over the years, but so long as family income keeps approximate pace with inflation, the family can be sure that the repayment will continue to take no larger share of its income.
- (c) Tenant Management Co-operatives. These are the only council tenants' organisations which can be given genuine management responsibility. They can actually employ staff not only to deal with repairs and maintenance, but also to manage letting and arrears. Should every council estate be given the right to transform itself into a co-operative?

AT WORK

9. Authority at work. The vast expansion of the nationalised sector and the welfare state has produced a correspondingly vast "low-authority" sector.

The great characteristic of many non-nationalised bodies - small businesses, shops, private schools - is direct experience of certain authority. You know the boss and you know that he or she is the boss. Nationalised bureaucracies of all types are different. Chains of command tend to be unclear or actually broken.

Hospital porters and school caretakers come to be laws unto themselves. Witness the ludicrous difficulty which the "authorities" have in persuading the caretakers to open their halls and playing fields out of hours. Indeed, any official body which includes "Authority" in its title is likely to lack precisely the characteristics of true authority: identifiability, direct responsibility and the undisputed right to act.

This uncertainty speedily demoralises the work group affected. People become aware of their rudderless state. In material terms, pilfering and petty protection rackets may spring up. In emotional terms, the consequences are loss of self-respect, disenchantment and sloth - the mediaeval sin of 'accidie'. This unhappy state echoes back into the home, and so cannot help corroding human relationships, just as it corrodes the purposes and behaviour of British trade unions in the public sector. The lack of authority at work rebounds to the discredit of authority generally, and makes the giving and receiving of the mildest orders a source of continuing friction. People will always remain suspicious of authority until they have experienced in their own lives some system of authority which works smoothly and without harshness to the general benefit.

Many people are now dimly aware of this. I believe that the most helpful reaction, therefore, is not to call for the "restoration of authority" in some far-reaching spiritual sense, but rather to try to restore effective authority in the public services - particularly in those which are not, for the moment, anyway, being reinvigorated by competition or by return to the private sector.

In general, the right principle would seem to be a simple one: the head person in the building ought also to be the effective employer and to have the undisputed power of hiring and firing. The headmaster, not the local authority, should employ the caretaker. The head doctor should employ all the hospital staff, medical and non-medical alike. In private schools and hospitals, this is already taken for granted. In Patients First, we took a substantial step back towards concentrating authority in a hospital on a single identifiable individual and a single clear chain of command. Can we go further in the NHS and elsewhere?

To ask all public bodies to review their chains of command is not to call for an intolerable reimposition of "Victorian" discipline. It is no more than to ask public bodies to behave in the manner which most private bodies have taken for granted since time began.

These preliminary ideas can be added to or subtracted from as we go along. I have endeavoured throughout to keep three basic criteria in mind:

- (a) the scheme should be practical and clear;
- (b) it should involve no significant extra cost to the taxpayer; and
- (c) it should be directed primarily to those who at present find it most difficult to exert effective control over their own lives and the lives of their families, namely the poor and those who are at present largely or wholly dependent upon services provided by the state.