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POLICY UNIT

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PRIME MINISTER

FAMILY POLICY GROUP MEETING: 9 MARCH

Use of School Facilities Outside School Hours (DES), Sport and Recreation (DCE)

The DES reports that, despite consistent encouragement by government, the use of school facilities outside school hours is still dismally low. During the summer holidays, only 16% of school playing fields were in use, and only 25% of indoor sports facilities. Many school football pitches are in far better condition than First Division grounds because they are so rarely used.

Yet these facilities were provided by public funds. In many areas, the school buildings and sports facilities are the largest community investment since the war. The public ought to have a right of access. Young and old alike ought to be able to use these facilities at any time outside school hours.

The first constraint is finance; or to put it more bluntly, the overtime of caretakers and security guards. As David Hobman, the Director of Age Concern, said to me last week: "It's the school caretakers who make social policy in this country."

How do we break through this obstacle? By setting up a volunteer corps of "Auxiliary Caretakers"? The DoE (paras 6-9) is supporting a Voluntary Sector Working Group to increase use of school facilities; it also envisages funding a new voluntary body to take the lead in organising play facilities under the inspiration of the National Playing Fields Association.

The prime problem seems to have changed from the time when the Duke of Edinburgh gave such an impetus to the Playing Fields movement. Today, the problem is less the shortage of pitches than the shortage of supervisors to deter vandals and meet the requirements of insurance and health and safety laws.

Do we have to accept the DES contention 4(vi) that caretakers and security guards "are well placed to drive a hard bargain because their duties and remuneration are closely defined in national, regional and local agreements"? On the contrary, caretakers' overtime is a well-known scandal, particularly in some London boroughs where some caretakers have been clocking up £15,000 a year /or more

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or more, merely by being on the premises after school hours (particularly in cases where they enjoy a grace-and-favour house on those premises).

Surely it would be reasonable to stipulate a standard overtime ceiling and provide that responsible volunteers would take over duties beyond a certain maximum number of hours.

If this initiative could be launched nationally under the aegis of the National Playing Fields Association, it would have a moral force which both the trade unions and local educational authorities would find it hard to resist, particularly if Mr. Macfarlane enjoys success in persuading big companies and nationalised industries to open up their facilities.

Preparation for Parenthood (DES, DHSS, CPRS)

These are all thoughtful papers. Governments are right to be tentative in this difficult area. And Norman Fowler makes the good point that voluntary organisations are generally much freer than statutory organisations to pioneer new approaches.

Yet since the state makes education compulsory and itself provides out of public funds 95% of the schools, the state explicitly takes on some responsibility for preparing children for adult life. And it is difficult entirely to exclude parenthood and family life from that preparation.

In practice, schools in Britain have almost every conceivable form of course to prepare their pupils for parenthood, ranging from nothing at all, through the most mechanistic forms of sex education, to more rounded courses including marriage and the care of babies, as well as denominational schools which may give instruction in the Christian or Jewish view of marriage.

As far as the government is concerned, The School Curriculum 1981 certainly specifies preparation for parenthood and family life as essential components in any curriculum. But the DES itself plays very little part in suggesting, let alone prescribing how these components should be provided. HM Inspectors merely report on what is being provided.

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The only government agency which does actively help schools with these components of the curriculum is the Health Education Council, which is entirely funded by the DHSS. Yet this help is provided in the context of providing an overall programme for the health of the community. Thus preparation for parenthood has to take its place in a programme concerned with diet, alcohol abuse, smoking and so on. Inevitably, it tends to boil down to a fairly mechanistic kind of sex education which concentrates on the physiology of sex and the means of contraception, with moral and emotional considerations as pious afterthoughts. In some cases, it is a good deal worse than mechanistic and actually promotes a callow relativism in sexual matters which many parents abhor and which is therefore objectionable on democratic grounds as well as on moral grounds (eg the notoriously unbalanced book list put out by the HEC).

We now have a new Chairman and Director-General at the Health Education Council. But even a much improved DHSS-funded programme is likely to be materialistic and physiological in its bias.

It is quite easy to imagine an alternative type of education for family life, which would include the practical, emotional and moral questions. Many schools are already doing their best to offer such an alternative course, although unfortunately I am told that the best courses tend to be designed for girls only and often for the less academic girls at that.

The difficulties of marriage and parenthood, the social consequences of marriage breakdown, the nature of the Christian tradition in relation to marriage and the family - these and other relevant subjects can be described quite straightforwardly, without counter-productive preachiness and without interfering with freedom of conscience or the delicate balance between the DES and the local councils.

Some questions worth considering are:

- i. Should the DES, possibly through the new Curriculum Development body, study the possibility of a curriculum development programme for preparation for parenthood?
- ii. Should the DES incorporate in such a programme the relevant activities of the Health Education Council?

Since writing this note, I chanced upon the following extract from an article by Dr Mia Pringle (who died last month). It was reprinted in one of the many interesting pamphlets and books on family and individual responsibility which were sent to this office as a result of the Guardian leak (it is an ill wind etc):

"Sex education should never have been isolated as a specific subject. To my mind it is irresponsible to provide information about the mechanics of sex - conception, birth, VD and contraception - without providing the broader context of human development from birth to adulthood, with special emphasis on relationships.

Young people themselves certainly want a greater emphasis in schools than is usually placed on family life and the care of children. This is equally true of boys and girls - nearly 60 percent of 16-year olds in a national study felt a need to know more about these aspects. Similarly, I found recently that both sixth formers and alienated non-achievers were fascinated to learn about child development.

The way forward would be to make preparation for parenthood a core curriculum subject at school for boys and girls. After all, the vast majority will become parents.

It would mean abandoning the present fragmentation of home economics, political education, civics, sex education, child care and health education. Though all have a bearing on human development, none provide the necessary comprehensive framework.

Of course, considerable learning will have taken place already in their own families and in their relationships with their peers; as well as by way of books, magazines and the media. But such knowledge needs to be presented in a more systematic way.

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To learn about the reasons why we feel and respond as we do, and about the complexity of human relationships, is surely a basic pre-requisite for adult maturity. Without it, health, political and sex education all lack a secure base.

Within such a coherent framework, important issues can be present without "preaching", "brainwashing" or boring pupils."

Mia Kellmer Pringle, 1980,
quoted in "Practical Partnerships"
by Joan Kidd of Family Network.