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POLICY UNITPRIME MINISTERWIDER PARENTAL CHOICE

It has been a tremendous struggle for Keith to advance the cause of vouchers as far as this. At every step, the opposition of the bureaucracy has been fierce and unremitting. We are facing nearly 40 years of fossilised prejudice.

What he proposes is only a Stage One scheme, but it has considerable practical merits.

- (a) It paves the way for a full-scale vouchers scheme at a later date.
- (b) It does not involve head-on confrontation with local education authorities at the outset.
- (c) It keeps to a minimum the amount of legislation required.

But the paper, as presented, bears too many scars inflicted by a hostile DES. It needs considerable streamlining before we can use it as a base document for further progress.

1. It is a mistake to start (para 5-8) with a picture of the full-scale vouchers system and then say "but, alas, we cannot have this" for if the half-way house works, we shall be able to proceed to Stage Two with strong backing from the public and from many teachers.

We should omit paras 5-8 and start with the proposals which we do intend to pursue and hammer home the point that we intend to narrow the gap between state and private education.

2. We should refute much more strongly the "polarisation myth" that with vouchers the worst State schools would sink

further into despair. On the contrary, it's voucher pressure that will impact most strongly upon just those schools.

At present, it is only the favoured comprehensives, usually but not always in middle-class areas, which are kept up to the mark by parental pressure.

We should also refute more strongly the DES classic myth that working-class and black parents don't care. It was working-class parents who closed William Tyndale. It is black parents in North London who are setting up their own schools.

3. We must bring out the point that, even under our Stage One scheme, every parent (not made clear in para 11), in or out of the State system, would receive a ticket/voucher/cheque. This was a crucial error in the Daily Telegraph leaked story.

The whole point is that the parent armed with a voucher - even though it may not have a cash value if used in the State sector - is now the customer.

4. The paper is too obsessed with conditions to be imposed on participating independent schools (paras 15-17).

If ~~we~~ want a limit on fees, it would be simpler to rule out schools which put up their fees by more than a modest percentage above the rate of inflation.

We want as many existing independent schools or possible to participate. And we want to make it as easy as possible for new ones to be founded.

5. The finance section (paras 18-21). There will be short-term transitional costs. But in the long term, the interlinking of public and private systems of education should help to reduce costs as well as improve quality.

6. There should be no hesitation (paras 22-23) about who issues the vouchers in the national scheme. It must be Central Government. To put it in the hands of local education authorities would be to reproduce in a new form the essential error of the 1944 Act.

7. Paras 26-33 make heavy weather of both the difficulties and costs of open enrolment. Kent already have such a scheme operating in part of the county without extra inducements. Other counties have also expressed enthusiasm. We should be able to improve on "at least two pilot projects" (para 39).

8. What Keith needs now is

(i) authorisation to prepare the draft legislation for 1983-4 enabling him to launch the pilot schemes in co-operation with the volunteer local education authorities,

(ii) authorisation formally to invite volunteer local authorities to prepare plans with him.

(iii) a Treasury commitment to provide extra money to pay for those schemes.

(iv) agreement that a commitment to those pilot schemes and to a subsequent national scheme should be included in the manifesto.

We think it is vital that he should have these authorisations. If we just go on saying that "vouchers are under consideration", the whole idea will dribble away into the sand. A Green Paper next Spring might help to explain the practical possibilities to the public.

9. But I think we should also urge him to prepare a shorter, simpler and more positive version of the paper to serve as the base document for future action.

That paper should make it clear that these are only the first steps towards enabling parents to exercise the

full choice and responsibility for their children's education which was given to them in theory under the 1944 Act.

*Fm*

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