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Education



PRIME MINISTER

WIDER PARENTAL CHOICE AND EDUCATION VOUCHERS

It may be some time before Keith Joseph is in a position to forward revised proposals on wider parental choice and education vouchers. In the meantime I feel I should record my views on the inappropriateness of the concept of education vouchers for Northern Ireland because of the differences between its education system and that of England and Wales.

The two major differences are:

1. There are only 7 independent schools in Northern Ireland catering for some 800 pupils and of these only 4 schools (involving about 500 pupils) have been "finally registered" by the Department of Education, ie, the standards of accommodation and education received are recognised as being satisfactory. These schools do not receive any assistance from public funds. The three main sectors of the grant-aided school system in Northern Ireland which cater for some 360,000 pupils are -
 - (a) controlled primary, secondary (intermediate) and grammar schools (under the management of Education and Library Boards) receive 100% grant aid from public funds for recurrent and capital expenditure;
 - (b) maintained primary and secondary (intermediate) schools (under the management of the RC Church) receive 100% grant-aid from public funds for recurrent expenditure and 85% grant for capital expenditure; and

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- (c) voluntary grammar schools (either denominational or non-denominational) receive substantial grants from public funds - about 94% of their recurrent expenditure and the vast majority of these schools also receive 85% grant for capital expenditure.
2. Unlike most local education authorities in the rest of the United Kingdom, transfer from primary to secondary education is, with only a few minor exceptions, based on selection at 11+ according to educational attainment. About 27% of the transfer age group go to grammar schools and the remainder to other secondary schools. Those children who satisfy the educational attainment for a grammar school place are regarded as non-fee-payers but there is also a fee-paying element in grammar schools. Within the transfer procedure arrangements the incidence of meeting parental preference is reasonably satisfactory - over the past 3 years about 93% of parents have been successful in obtaining places for their children in the secondary school of their first preference, rising to about 98% when second preferences are taken into account. These arrangements are kept under review to see if parental choice can be further extended.

The independent sector plays no relevant part in Northern Ireland and there is no pressure of any consequence to change the present selective system of secondary education. The differences between the two systems mean that there are sound educational and political reasons for not following in Northern Ireland measures that have been adopted elsewhere in the United Kingdom. For example, the Assisted Places Scheme does not operate here, nor is there any need for it.

I am anxious to preserve and where possible improve the standards of education in Northern Ireland, but I am sure that any additional funds available for this purpose could be better used in the

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Northern Ireland situation, where the funds are centrally administered, by building on the strengths of the existing system rather than by introducing a voucher scheme.

I have copied this minute to members of MISC 91 and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be the initials "J.P." with a stylized flourish.

J P

7 March 1983

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