

EDUCATION: THE CRITICS ANSWERED

In a major speech in the House of Commons on 26th April, Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education and Science, exposed the total hypocrisy of the Labour Party's attacks on the Government's record on education. He examined in detail Labour's own record in Government between 1974 and 1979, and contrasted their failures with the solid achievements of this Government.

Labour's Expenditure on Education

Sir Keith went straight to the heart of the current controversy over the level of resources devoted to education. The Labour Party has boasted of the generous financial provision which it made whilst it was in office. Sir Keith set out the facts:

'Between 1975-6, the Labour Government's peak year for spending on education and for numbers at school, and 1978-9 ... spending on education fell by 2.6 per cent in real terms, an average fall of nearly 1 per cent a year. I draw the House's attention to that sanctimonious party's record.'

He went on to list the specific areas in which the last Labour Government had cut expenditure on education:

'Expenditure on primary schools decreased by 3 per cent, on the youth service by 3 per cent, on school milk by 16 per cent, and on school building by 40 per cent, although secondary school numbers were increasing. The Labour party cannot claim that it continued to spend.'

Education Spending Under This Government

Sir Keith showed conclusively that in real terms the financial circumstances of schools today are in every way better than they were under Labour:

'In 1978-9 ... £7.5 billion was spent on education in England and the universities of Great Britain. In 1983-4, that will have increased to more than £12 billion. I accept that that reflects some years of inflation, but it also reflects a real increase ... We are spending at least 5 per cent more in real terms per child than did the Labour Government in 1978-9.'

Nevertheless, in certain areas local education authorities have experienced genuine difficulties as a result of the reallocation of resources made necessary by the fact that school rolls have fallen by 10 per cent since 1979. As Sir Keith acknowledged, diseconomies of scale as the school population declines present real difficulties for administrators and teachers.

Pupil/Teacher Ratio

Record spending per pupil under this Government has made possible a record pupil/teacher ratio. It now stands at 18.1:1 as compared with 18.9:1 when Labour left office. Although fewer teachers are now employed, the size of the profession has fallen proportionately less than the number of pupils. On this point too Sir Keith shattered Labour's baseless claims:

'We reject as humbug any criticism of the reduction in teachers, because the Labour Government's last public expenditure White Paper declared their intention to cut teacher numbers by 4 per cent.'

Labour's Obsession with Spending

Sir Keith also showed how Labour's preoccupation with educational expenditure leads it to ignore other equally important educational issues. Its general approach contrasts sharply with that of the Conservative Party, as the Secretary of State emphasised:

'The Government's prime commitment in education is to maintain and improve standards of education. Opposition Members habitually speak as if the only thing that affects the achievement of that

aim is the level of public spending, but that is not so, and I think that they know it. Parents rightly look for schools where their efforts to help their children are welcomed, where high standards of behaviour are encouraged, where teachers succeed in motivating their pupils, whatever their background, and where examination results are good ... There are local authorities where expenditure on secondary schools is relatively modest but where the pupils – not necessarily from advantaged backgrounds – achieve relatively good results. For an example of the opposite, we need look no further than County Hall' (i.e. the headquarters of the GLC).

General Educational Reform

Sir Keith acknowledged that in certain limited respects the last Labour Government had attempted to tackle some of the outstanding education issues which no amount of money would ever succeed in solving by itself. However, their achievements look distinctly unimpressive when set against those of this Government. Furthermore, Labour in some areas did positive harm. Sir Keith highlighted those areas:

'They cut places in teacher training by 50 per cent – that should be remembered before there is any criticism of the present Government. They abolished direct grant schools – shame on them for doing so. They imposed comprehensivisation, and they were wrong in doing so.'

The Secretary of State then put forward the full catalogue of this Government's achievements:

- 'We restored the freedom to local education authorities which had been taken away by the 1976 Act.'
- 'We introduced the 1980 Act which provided for an increase in parental choice coupled with the first appeal system and a requirement on all schools to supply information so that parents were better equipped to choose.'
- Under the 1981 Education Act children who might otherwise have gone to special schools can be integrated into ordinary schools.
- 'We introduced and are still spreading a pervasive scheme of micro-electronic education in secondary and primary schools.'
- 'We propose to initiate a national development centre for the training of head teachers and heads of department.'
- 'In September we are introducing a 17-plus examination.'
- 'We have produced a White Paper on teacher-training quality.'
- 'We have found funds from the taxpayer to give a number of local education authorities – many bid for the opportunity – enough money to develop a curriculum more suited to children whom we describe as low attainers.'
- Under a new pilot scheme, 14 local education authorities will be introducing a new element of technical education into the curriculum.
- For the first time the reports of the Schools Inspectorate are being published in full, under arrangements which ensure that their recommendations are followed up systematically.

AC/SCB