

CONSERVATIVE POLICY ON EDUCATION AND THE ARTS

(A paper by Mr. St. John Stevas)

Themes

1. The aims of our education system should be to impart to young people a basic body of knowledge, to instil in them a sense of moral values, to teach them to value our culture and democratic traditions and to equip them to play an active and useful role in a modern industrial society.
2. In every aspect of education, the pursuit of excellence must be our guiding star. We set our face against what Matthew Arnold called "the elimination of superiorities" and believe that selection and competition are essential if the abilities and aptitudes of each child are to be developed to the full. Equality of opportunity, not equality, is our ideal. We believe in the opening up of the career to talent.
3. As Conservatives, our watchwords are variety and choice and we reject the imposition of single, all-purpose solutions to meet the widely different needs of individuals. Thus we oppose enforced secondary reorganisation on a particular pattern and the Labour notion of "comprehensive" regional universities.
4. We have therefore made the raising of standards and the extension of parental influence and choice our first priorities in education. Those parents who send their children to maintained schools are entitled to satisfaction just as are those who, in exercise of their rights, pay for education privately.
5. Despite the apparent shift in the Government's area of concern from structures to standards there has been little change in their actual policies. Their vendetta against the grammar and independent schools continues. Moreover they are taking no effective action to raise standards and Mrs. Williams has failed to convince her Cabinet colleagues of the need for legislation on parental choice of school - her position on parents' rights in this respect appears to be weakening. The field thus remains open to us.

Local Authorities, Parents and Schools

6. We believe that local education authorities should, as far as possible, have the freedom to decide on the organisation of schools in their area. We shall therefore repeal those sections of the 1976 Education Act which forced all local authorities to go fully comprehensive, thus allowing them to concentrate the available resources on improving existing schools rather than introducing makeshift comprehensive schemes. At the same time we shall make it clear that schemes for reorganisation should retain good schools of proven worth and only on this basis would they be confirmed by a Conservative Secretary of State.
7. We shall restore to local authorities their freedom to take up places at independent schools.

8. At present, parental rights in choosing a school are unclear. In accordance with our Parents' Charter, we shall introduce legislation imposing clear obligations on government and local authorities to take account of the wishes of parents when allocating children to schools and giving parents a right of appeal if they are dissatisfied with the official choice. The legislation will also give parents the right to representation on school governing bodies (as recommended in the Taylor Report) and help them make their choice of school by requiring schools to publish prospectuses which include examination and other results. Rigid zoning arrangements are no longer necessary in view of the declining birth-rate and should be abolished.

9. Choice of school should not be thought of as being confined to that between comprehensives, on the one hand, and grammar or independent schools on the other. As important is the choice between different kinds of comprehensive school: single-sex or mixed, denominational or non-denominational, traditional or experimental. Comprehensive schools should be encouraged to specialise and should be able to select the pupils most likely to excel at the schools' speciality, whether that is science, languages, music or sport. They could become magnets attracting pupils from surrounding areas.

10. The educational voucher idea is an interesting one but the practical and administrative difficulties should not be underestimated. If local education authorities wish to introduce them we would encourage a limited number of experimental schemes and monitor their progress carefully.

Standards and Values

11. To raise standards in all schools, we will introduce national minimum standards in reading, writing and arithmetic for all pupils. The standards would be set by the Assessment of Performance Unit at the Department of Education and Science and tests would be devised by them in consultation with local education authorities and teachers. These tests, which would be locally administered, would be taken at appropriate ages such as 7, 11, and 14 to allow sufficient time for remedial work to be undertaken before a) transfer to secondary school and b) leaving school.

12. Her Majesty's Inspectorate is currently well below its staffing complement. We should increase its numbers and re-introduce the full-scale inspections by the HMI which have been phased out in recent years.

13. There are major areas of knowledge - English, maths, science, modern languages, religious education and the arts - which no child should drop before the age of 16. These should form a protected core of subjects in every secondary school. Pupils who take CSE and GCE exams - the vast majority of school-children - could be required to take at least one exam in each major study area. This would be similar to the idea of a grouped certificate at 16-plus which Mrs. Williams now seems to have abandoned.

14. While supporting a core curriculum in the sense just outlined we are opposed to central government interference in the detailed content of the curriculum.

15. We believe that every child should leave school with a knowledge of religion, a sense of values, a perception of what is right and what is wrong and an awareness of his or her social responsibilities. Parents have an important role to play here and their co-operation should be sought but schools should accept their responsibilities in this sphere.

16. An important part of children's moral development will stem from religious education, the purpose of which should be to impart knowledge of religion, to awaken young people to the spiritual dimension of life and to the possibility of making religious choice and commitment. We stand four-square behind the religious clauses of the 1944 Act - the obligation on schools to hold a daily act of worship and to provide religious instruction should remain.

17. The paramount need is to renew religious education, since the provisions of the Act will be of little use if the subject is decaying from within. We therefore propose to set up an inquiry into religious education to report within a limited period to examine the actual state of the subject in schools, its purpose today, the supply and training of teachers and to make recommendations for action. In view of the statutory responsibilities of the DES and local authorities with regard to religious education, we also propose that a representative national RE advisory body should be set up in accordance with the recommendations of the Religious Education Council.

18. Meanwhile, we are demonstrating our concern by holding a series of conferences and lectures on the theme of "Values in Education".

19. We shall make an all-out effort to raise standards of discipline and reduce levels of truancy, particularly in large inner-city comprehensives. To this end, we think that central government should require teacher training institutions to place much greater stress in initial training on the nature of discipline and to give practical instruction in classroom techniques for maintaining order. LEAs, governing bodies and headteachers should be required to give teachers clear guidelines so that they know by whom, and on what occasions, various sanctions may be used, namely suspension, withdrawal, expulsion, transfer and corporal punishment. The duties of Her Majesty's Inspectorate should include spot checks on attendance at schools and ensuring that schools keep accurate attendance registers. The Home Visitors' Service should be strengthened in order to reduce truancy.

20. Many disciplinary problems are caused by the bored 15-year-old waiting to leave school. We believe that a more concerted effort could be made to link their last year at school with the world of work. We shall issue a circular to local authorities on careers guidance to achieve a more uniformly high standard of provision. We shall also promote "linked courses" with local further education colleges. In general, we will encourage a greater vocational bias in schools. A study group is currently examining the whole area of vocational education and training and will report back to me after Easter.

21. Our commitment to the principle of a school-leaving age of 16 is clear but we think that school-leaving arrangements should be made more flexible in practice. Headteachers should be able to

allow selected pupils, with the consent of their parents, to leave school at the age of 15 if they are going into a further education course, an apprenticeship or the armed services.

Schools

22. Nursery Schools. It is still our hope that the target set in Mrs. Thatcher's 1972 White Paper can be achieved by 1982. We shall certainly wish to expand nursery education and, within the resources available, to give special priority to deprived areas. We also believe that the development of the play groups movement should be encouraged. Play groups have the advantage of not needing large economic resources.

23. Primary Schools. Conservative education policy has traditionally emphasised the importance of the early years of schooling. The primary school population is expected to fall from a peak of 5.2 million in 1974 to 4.0 million in 1985. This will provide an opportunity to improve standards. We have long stressed the importance of 'O' level maths for future teachers if standards are to be raised and Mrs. Williams has now accepted our case. We attach great importance to remedial education at the primary stage, the need for which would be indicated by the results of our proposed tests.

24. The last Conservative Government devoted almost the whole of that part of the major building programme available for improving or replacing out-of-date schools to primary schools. Although great progress was made, a recent Government survey of schools made in 1975 and 1976 showed that a fifth of all primary places were built before 1903 and more than half before 1945. We should therefore resume the improvement programme as soon as financial circumstances permit.

25. Falling primary rolls will also provide an opportunity to accommodate many rising fives in primary schools.

26. Small village schools often play a vital role in the life of the local community and attract good teachers. Wherever possible, such schools should be kept open. In practice, savings made by the closure of village schools are often offset by the cost of transporting children to a more distant school.

27. Secondary Schools. We are committed to maintaining and encouraging a variety of secondary schools. We shall retain existing schools of proven worth such as grammar schools and consider sympathetically proposals for new selective schools.

28. Comprehensive Schools. 80 per cent of secondary school pupils now attend comprehensive schools. Although we are likely to return to power before many authorities have completed their reorganisation it is likely that most will wish to continue along that path even when compulsion is removed. Rather than unscrambling comprehensive reorganisation already carried out, we should therefore encourage local authorities to carry out practical improvements to see that comprehensive schools really do work for children of all abilities. These would include:

- reducing the size of the largest comprehensives, reorganising schools into smaller units and building smaller schools in future whilst ensuring that schools are of sufficient size to provide a broad range of options;

- discouraging split sites;
- allowing comprehensives to specialise and to select for their own speciality;
- discouraging the general use of mixed ability teaching and allowing only those staff with the requisite training to teach classes of mixed ability;
- instructing schools to introduce different curricula for different ability groups;
- moving towards streaming and setting, with particular emphasis on setting as the most flexible form of internal selection;
- discouraging a general move towards the sixth form college and keeping traditional sixth forms wherever possible, since without them schools are decapitated and it is difficult to attract good teachers; encouraging co-operation between sixth forms in all types of schools, and supporting experiments like the ILEA's sixth form centres where sixth forms are very small.

29. We had in 1974 proposed an inquiry into comprehensive schools but so many issues have been discussed since, particularly during the "Great Debate", that we are now of the view that a general inquiry is no longer necessary. However, we should like to examine specific aspects of comprehensive schools in the light of various inquiries, initiated by this Government, such as the curricular survey.

30. We consider that public examinations are vital: they measure the progress of the child and the progress, or decline, of the educational system. A great problem with our existing school-leaving examinations is the wide variation between the different GCE and CSE boards. True comparability barely exists. Some of the current proposals by the Schools Council for a common 16+ examination are so school-centred that they would create greater variations, reduce academic rigour and lead to a loss of control over examination standards. The present pattern of independent GCE and CSE systems needs to be rationalised but there is no case for a common exam, as opposed to a common system of examining. Any system must do justice to the needs and achievements of both ends of the ability range. In particular, syllabuses designed and assessed by the teachers should only be established in accordance with strict national criteria and should be subject to an effective monitoring procedure.

31. Assisted Places Scheme. We remain firm in our commitment to restore the direct grant ideal by means of an Assisted Places Scheme. Under this scheme, the old system of capitation and sixth-form grants will disappear and the available money from public funds will be devoted to a central government scheme for the partial or total remission of tuition fees for day pupils and boarders alike, in accordance with a generous income scale. Since all parents of modest means will be able to claim the remission of part or all of the fees direct from central government, there will be no need for any subvention by local education authorities (the former "free places").

Admission to the schools will be on a selective basis subject to the condition that a certain proportion of the entrants - probably at least 25 per cent - should be drawn from the maintained primary schools.

32. The amount of money that can be devoted to the scheme will depend on economic circumstances, but it would be essential to allocate sufficient funds to start a substantial scheme. As a rough guide, I have said that we would take the total cost of the old direct grant system in 1975-6, its last full year of operation (= £38.5 million), uprate it in line with inflation and thus arrive at the overall sum within which the Assisted Places Scheme could be financed.

33. Independent Schools. We reaffirm our belief in the right of parents to educate their children privately if they so wish. We would encourage by every possible means greater co-operation between the independent and maintained sectors. We regret the Labour Government's decision to stop the recognition of independent schools as efficient and we should reintroduce the practice as soon as possible after our proposed strengthening of the Inspectorate. In addition, we should issue instructions to local authorities that a teacher's probationary year in a recognised independent school should be considered equivalent to a probationary year in a maintained school.

Meals and Transport

34. The Government subsidy on school meals and transport is at present high and there is scope for savings in this area. The subsidy on school meals will be £362 million in the current year, nearly 60 per cent of the total cost, and the cost to LEAs of school transport was estimated to be £99 million in 1976-7. We should favour giving local authorities greater discretion over school meals and transport. In the case of meals, we could:

either devolve onto local authorities the power to decide whether to provide meals or not (this would involve legislation),

or give local authorities discretion as to charges, quality of meals, etc. (this could be done by regulation).

In the case of school transport, the statutory walking distances could be abolished and local authorities allowed to provide school transport as they think fit. This would require legislation.

Teachers

35. If standards are to be raised, we consider it essential to ensure a flow of dedicated and qualified teachers into our schools, to monitor their standard of teaching and to provide them with a career structure which will keep them in the classroom. Too often in the past public statements by prominent Conservatives have been critical of teachers and the false impression has been created that the Party is in some way "anti-teacher". We should take every opportunity of showing our support for the teaching profession and our concern and

sympathy for their problems. The point has important political implications - there are today about 500,000 teachers; they have considerable influence in the community; and they are severely disillusioned with the Labour Government. In particular we have an opportunity to improve relations with the Teachers Unions with whom we have been in continuous dialogue. Our theme with regard to teachers should be that of promoting greater professionalism. The creation of a General Teaching Council, to enable teachers to regulate their own professional standards, would be a major contribution in this respect.

35. Training. We think the development of in-service training should take priority over the establishment of an all-graduate profession and that there should be a reserve power to require certain teachers to attend that training. A Policy Group under Dr. Rhodes Boyson is currently examining all aspects of teacher training and will report shortly.

37. Headteachers. We believe that the importance of making good headteacher appointments cannot be over-emphasised. Appointments procedures throughout the country should therefore be overhauled under the supervision of the Secretary of State.

Further and Higher Education

38. In higher education, we adhere to the Robbins principle, which states that higher education courses should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so. The period of major expansion in the universities is over and they would now welcome an era of consolidation. Within the expansion that will be necessary to accommodate the bulge in the 18-22 age group of the mid-1980s, we therefore propose that: nearly all of this should be absorbed by the non-university sector; emphasis should be placed on increasing higher education opportunities for women; two-year courses should be expanded, (while noting that the universities will not accept a two year degree) and recurrent provision should be increased.

39. As soon as economic circumstances permit, we should introduce a rolling quinquennial grant system for the universities. We should also rectify the university lecturers' pay anomaly as soon as possible, since we consider it essential to have contented university staff if we are to have flourishing universities.

40. We believe that advanced further education should be placed under a central funding and planning agency, similar to the University Grants Committee. This would help to reduce the present proliferation and duplication of advanced courses and to discourage a drift in some polytechnics from vocational to academic courses. Through this national body, we would promote the expansion of part-time and evening provision, both because it is cost-effective and because the students' motivation is higher. Before making a detailed statement of policy we are awaiting the public reaction to the Oakes Report on the management of public sector higher education.

41. In non-advanced further education, we should place particular emphasis on technician courses and other provision of a strictly vocational nature. Here too we should encourage the expansion of part-time provision.

42. Continuing Education. Faced with their family and work commitments, adult students cannot fit into a traditional pattern of residential higher education. We have to cater for the commuting student - providing more modest, more localised opportunities, and searching for new techniques which extend opportunities without demanding excessive new resources. The ultimate logic is to make learning a much more individualistic activity; to help mature students to re-educate themselves. The Open University has demonstrated what can be done. Directed private study, involving correspondence learning combined with face-to-face tuition presents many possibilities. Taking instruction to the actual place of work, possibly using the equipment on the spot, also needs to be looked at. It is vital to snap out of the "progress equals building" mentality. Models exist in the United States which would be worth trying on a pilot basis; the notion for example of a "university without walls", which involves teaching staff presenting courses out in the community - in school halls or rented facilities of any kind wherever there is a demand.

43. Student Grants. The system of student support is currently in a state of great confusion. Severe cutbacks in local authority spending are hitting discretionary awards particularly hard at a time when the Manpower Services Commission is offering unemployed school-leavers generous allowances to follow short-term skill-orientated courses. There is thus no incentive for young people to follow longer-term further education courses which may or may not qualify for a grant, when they know that after six weeks of unemployment, they are eligible for the generous MSC schemes.

44. We are pledged to conduct a thorough review of student grants and, in that review, to give priority to the reduction of the parental contribution. I would like us to give a pledge of eventual abolition of the parental contribution since this would benefit many of our supporters and at the same time bring us in new recruits from the middle and professional classes. The cost has been estimated by the Government at just over £100 million in the current academic year. We should also extend the categories of eligibility for mandatory awards, particularly for 16-19 year olds following vocational further education courses. The grants system has developed with a bias against non-advanced vocational courses.

Particular Problems

45. Future of ILEA. After our meeting with GLC Councillors on 26th January, 1977 and a further meeting on 1st March this year, agreement was reached that it would be desirable if the ILEA were to be abolished and educational powers returned to the Boroughs, with special arrangements (if necessary) for further education. The initiative could be taken by the GLC who have undertaken to put forward proposals for legislation to the Shadow Cabinet. Meanwhile, we are awaiting the publication of the Marshall Report and the clearance of the Shadow Cabinet before making a public statement of policy.

46. Reform of Schools Council. We have repeatedly argued that the Schools Council, which is overwhelmingly teacher-dominated, should be reformed to give greater representation to parents, industry and other outside interests. The reforms currently proposed are unsatisfactory, since the new structure would be cumbersome and would give little representation to either parents or industry. We shall therefore review the structure in Government. Alternatively, the Schools Council could be disbanded and its functions assumed by the strengthened Inspectorate.

The Arts

47. The arts are of minimal importance in terms of public expenditure (total government expenditure on the arts in 1977-8 is only £112 million, out of a total DES vote of £8 billion) yet they are of considerable political significance since the arts constituency is influential. Mrs. Thatcher summed up the point economically in a letter sent to Lord Gibson in July 1976:

"I can say, however, that I don't believe in the present economic situation it will make sense for any Government to look for candle-end economies which will yield a very small saving, whilst causing upset out of all proportion to the economies achieved. Public expenditure savings directed at the arts would come into this category and would not make any significant reduction in our borrowing requirement.

"In view of this, I can assure you that we will continue to support the arts, though the precise level of expenditure and the rate at which it can be increased must inevitably depend on the economic situation we inherit".

48. The device of having a "Minister for the Arts" has not worked well in recent years and the post is not popular with the arts world. Their concern is that the arts should have a direct voice in the Cabinet. Cabinet representation is, in fact, achieved through the presence of the Secretary of State for Education in the Cabinet who has ultimate responsibility for the arts and we recommend that this should be recognised by changing the name of the department and the title of the Secretary of State so that it included "The Arts", thus Department of Education, Science and the Arts. This would have the further merit of symbolising the importance we attach to the arts.

49. We remain committed to the introduction of a Public Lending Right financed out of central government funds.

50. We shall publish a discussion document outlining our policy on the arts in June this year and this will be discussed at a conference on the arts to be held in London in July. The Conference should be a useful contribution to maintaining public activity in what tends to be an off period. It is our hope that Mrs. Thatcher might open the conference, thus giving expression to the importance we attach to this area of policy.