



## VIVE LA DIFFERENCE . .

By far the most interesting aspect of the Government's White Paper *Better Schools* is its similarity to the Labour Party's own blueprint for the future organisation of schools *A charter for pupils and their parents*. The former appeared in March, the latter in mid-April.

The documents represent decisive defeats for the radical wings of both parties. For the 'libertarians' of the Tory Right there was disappointment that the White Paper contained no reference to vouchers or the re-introduction of selection. And Labour's offering marks the abandonment of any pretence that education might be a weapon in the struggle for a socialist transformation of society.

The White Paper makes six major proposals. The law on school governing bodies is to be changed so that in future there are an equal number of parent and LEA governors. This is a climbdown from Sir Keith Joseph's earlier plan to give parents a majority and is yet another 'stab in the back' for his former acolytes on the Right. A new examination, the AS level, is to start in 1989. It will be worth half an A level and is intended to broaden the sixth form curriculum.

Legislation is to be introduced for a new specific-grant for in-service training. Joseph is threatening to give himself powers to require regular appraisal of teachers but has decided against an earlier proposal to introduce a probationary period for headteachers. New guidelines on the minimum size of schools will be issued soon and the Government is to launch an anti-truancy drive.

Reaction to the proposals has been muted. The teacher unions have predictably, and correctly, attacked the plan to introduce appraisal by legislation as a ruse to justify depressing teachers' salaries and holding the line on public expenditure. But they have remained silent on all other points bar the specific grants for in-service training which they have welcomed as a step in the right direction.

Similar points were made by Labour's education spokesman Giles Radice who found himself in the difficult position of having to respond to a White Paper which he

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could well have drafted himself. Indeed the only significant divide between government and opposition is the amount of cash that is to be provided for the education service. Radice freely admits that there is much in common between himself and Joseph and welcomes the isolation of 'extremists' on both sides.

The 'middle ground' that both now occupy is marked by a desire to create schools that can 'meet the demands of the modern world' (White Paper terminology). Stress is placed on the contribution that the new technology can make towards a more 'relevant' curriculum and the importance of good vocational training to the nation's economic development. Both Joseph and Radice accept that to some extent the crisis of British capitalism can be explained by the inadequacy of the education offered in our schools - especially the undervaluation of engineering, applied sciences and technology.

Labour's lurch to the right is easily explained by the disastrous election results of 1979 and 1983. Polls taken at the time, and since, show that a majority of the electorate believe that Labour would sacrifice quality in the interests of greater egalitarianism. The Tories have successfully labelled Labour as the party prepared to abandon excellence in favour of social equality, ready to ride roughshod over the natural desire of parents that their children should do well at school.

It is, of course, absolute tosh but Radice is convinced that Labour must become a party that not only believes in 'standards' but is perceived by the electorate to do so. To this end Labour's 'charter' concentrates on the rights of parents and pupils.

Labour is now committed to giving parents 'substantial representation on governing bodies'. And it is no longer only the Tories who favour parents' rights to choose. 'All parents', says the charter, 'should have the right to express a preference for a school they wish their child to attend and to receive special consideration if they live near the school'.

The White Paper threatens legislation to force appraisal on teachers whilst Labour goes no further than to say 'that there should be an agreed system of appraisal of teachers' effectiveness in the classroom'. But Radice has made his position quite clear 'Labour is not the party of the teachers - I would, if necessary be prepared to get tough with them. We are, of course, sympathetic to their case but we must represent the interests of parents'.

Labour Party education documents used to be liberally sprinkled with socialist good

intentions usually in the form of objectives to be achieved in the far distant future. No longer - in 1985 the likely impact of a policy on parents is a major consideration.

This is best illustrated by the curious rediscovery by the party of the value of homework. Last year Dr David Hargreaves, Oxford academic turned senior inspector for the ILEA, claimed that pupils who do not consistently do homework lose a whole year of education over a five year compulsory period. This discovery has led to the leftwing ILEA leadership urging all London schools to adopt a homework policy.

There is nothing wrong with homework except that it is difficult to do if you live in an overcrowded house or flat. It helps if you have a room to yourself which is well heated in winter. It is a positive advantage if your parents are able to assist you with the work. Yet despite any research to back up Hargreaves and in the face of the well documented difficulties that working class children have in doing it properly because of home conditions, the Labour Party now believes that every school should 'implement a homework policy'. This is in line with the Government who have issued 'guidelines' on homework for use by schools.

To be fair the charter does say that schools should be open for longer hours so that pupils can do their homework at school but this is very much an afterthought and was only added after several members of the party's education committee objected that homework was no substitute for pupils learning how to work on their own which is a different matter altogether and too 'technical' to be electorally popular.

On exams the charter has little to say other than that labour will introduce a 'record of achievement' for all pupils recording not only academic but also sporting, dramatic and personal achievements. It is hoped that eventually the 'record' will 'be seen as being of greater value as educational currency than the more traditional public exams'. Radice makes no bones of the fact that a future Labour government will not be preparing a radical reform of the existing exam system. Sir Keith Joseph is personally committed to records of achievement.

In the 1960s the advocates of comprehensive had great hopes for the future of the maintained school system. The Labour Party charter says that the argument for comprehensive secondary schools has been won. But what sort of victory is it when Labour and Tory find themselves in near total agreement on the objectives, if not the financing, of education?

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