

# focus

that supports her, to restore her personal credibility - to find an issue with a wide populist appeal, and so divert attention from divisive issues where clear differences continue to receive public attention and widespread media coverage.

'Thatcher will defy critics in manifesto' was the headline of the main news story in *The Times* on 10 March - and 'Election retreat ruled out'. 'Cabinet level sources' (Bernard Ingham perhaps?) are credited with the 'news' that the prime minister intends to fight her third-term election on 'a radical Conservative manifesto' which will 'defy the growing cabinet and party demands for a retreat on vintage Thatcherism'. Further it is firmly claimed the party's manifesto 'will not be a matter for discussion by the cabinet' - or anyone else, apparently.

And the main issue? 'Downing Street sources' have confirmed that the prime minister wants to attack 'problems of education' as a priority, first, by introducing a 'credit' (or voucher) system 'which would enable parents to choose between the state or private schools'; second, by establishing direct grant (or centrally funded) primary schools in inner city areas.

This was how education was put at the top of the agenda two months ago - and has remained there ever since, fuelled by further 'radical' proposals - for instance, to 'denationalise' the whole system of schooling (Oliver Letwin, until recently of the prime minister's policy unit, in *The Times*); or to extirpate any control by local authorities over their own systems (Ronald Butt *The Times* 27 March).

In the meantime the temperature has risen for other reasons as well. Keith Joseph's announcement that he proposes to step down as Secretary of State has resulted in an open power struggle within the Tory party for the succession. Tory right-wing backbenchers, organised in the 92 club (there are less of them than that) are boosting the egregious Rhodes Boyson - who certainly played a key populist role in the return of the Thatcher government in 1979. Patten, the present junior minister, is fighting back; each is making policy statements about the future in education to add to the raucous voices now fighting for attention. In the meantime the annual conferences of the main teachers' unions, held over Easter, have dramatically expressed teacher opinion on central government initiatives. When the NAS/UJW, the second largest union, listened to Joseph's invited address in total silence, the Secretary of State was forced to endure what was

probably an unprecedented, and certainly a sobering experience. The alienation of the teachers from government policies (and by no means only on salaries) now goes very deep indeed.

The 'manifesto' policies for the Tory party now being put forward by different groupings or individuals (even though the election may not take place for two years) take two main directions. First, privatisation - hence the credit or voucher schemes are being revived (though widely considered both expensive and impracticable). Others propose the selling off of whole groups of what are now publicly maintained schools to industry or other private companies, though it is difficult to see how these could be made to yield a profit (a *sine qua non* of privatisation) unless government money handed out to the 'customers' (parents) covers not only the cost of schooling but is sufficient to yield also a substantial profit margin for the hoped-for educational entrepreneurs.

The second line, recently threatened by Patten, is for greatly strengthened central government control of education. Hence the idea of 'direct grant' primary schools, now elevated (according to the usual 'sources') to the proposal to establish 50 or 60 so-called 'Crown' schools which would embody all that is best in existing practice, according to Joseph/Thatcher criteria. This direction of policy has now been enhanced in Patten's suggestion for a general shift to direct central control over the system as a whole (in his notorious 'yob society' speech).

What all this has to do with what is going on in the schools *now* is difficult to see. What it has to do with is the *politics* of education - and with a vengeance. Education has suddenly become the pawn in a set of political manoeuvres - in what may prove to be the death agony of Thatcherism. Joseph is now clearly set on a collision course with the teachers over the new 16 plus exam, the GCSE. The increasingly threatening tone of his public pronouncements (for instance in his *Daily Telegraph* article of 8 April) and of those of Patten will do nothing whatever to resolve the very real problems facing education. On the contrary, they will exacerbate them.

Thatcherite Tories, Joseph and Thatcher herself are becoming increasingly desperate, and are now clearly playing for high stakes. They believe that another populist, anti-teacher (and anti-public education) movement may win back their lost popularity. They are likely to receive a dusty answer.

Brian Simon

## Crisis in education

Over the last two months education, very unusually, has been headline news in all the media - often making the front page both in the popular and the quality newspapers. What has happened, and what is it all about?

There are clear links with the crisis in the Tory party following the Westland affair, the resignations of Heseltine and Brittan, and the consequent slump in popular support, highlighted by some fairly dramatic opinion polls and confirmed by the Fulham by-election. Within this there is the clear drive by Margaret Thatcher, and that section of the party