

The Core Of The Matter

The prospect of a common curriculum being taught in schools is both uniting and dividing the Tories in these pre-election months. Education Secretary Kenneth Baker has said the school curriculum should be centrally prescribed and limited to a specific number of subjects studied by all pupils regardless of their ability.

But for Mr Baker, the question of what a core curriculum should contain is less important than what is left out. At the Young Conservatives' conference in February he suggested that Third World studies and teaching about homosexuality would be taboo under his national system. Leftwing propaganda, he added, would also be outlawed, although he was less specific about material emanating from the other end of the political spectrum.

The most radical venture would be the setting of a series of attainment targets (or benchmarks) applicable throughout the primary and secondary school system. Pupils who failed these targets would be held back an extra year or two before heading off again up the ladder to the next rung.

Mr Baker says he wants this common curriculum to be framed by consensus. But the reality is that it could be parliament rather than the so-called educational public which judged what books should be read each morning in the nation's schools. For many Tories the idea that children should all tuck into the *Little Red Hen* after perusing the Book of Common Prayer is an attractive proposition.

But such plans could be thwarted by many within Conservative ranks. Not least is the growing opposition of local education authorities, which would effectively be abolished under a national scheme. In the shires, where traditional Tory support still remains



Uniform lessons

strong, influential Tory councillors like Philip Merridale, the education chairman of Hampshire, are already digging their trenches in readiness to oppose a central takeover of education.

Another problem is how a common curriculum would fit into the two-tier education system many Tory MPs and the prime minister seek. Under the grammar and secondary school divide, which in turn would restore the academic and vocational polarisation of the service, a national curriculum would be virtually impossible to deliver.

If the Tories' educational plans are fraught with internal contradictions, the Labour Party debate threatens to open up a number of possible blind alleys. Like Mr Baker, education spokesman Giles Radice is seduced by the search for a more rational range of school subjects geared to national needs. But where he differs is over the extent to which local authorities would retain their ability to dictate regional variety within a core choice.

The Labour-controlled Inner London Education Authority - the largest, and only directly elected education authority in England - has already made a start in ensuring all its schools teach a core curriculum. Despite his constant attacks on the ILEA, Mr Baker is said to be keen on pushing their example throughout the country according to set criteria. For the moment he has the initiative over Labour which has failed so far to explain why what's good for London is not necessarily fit for the nation at large. •

Nick Tester

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