

## Kenneth Baker

When Kenneth Baker spoke in the opening debate of the 1979 parliament, he talked of walking 'the narrow strip of land that lies between sycophancy and rebellion'. His political record and background - former protege to Iain Macleod, former PPS to Edward Heath, former minister for information technology - suggest that Baker stands firmly on the pragmatic, technocratic wing of the Tory party. His style has always been carefully crafted to avoid ideological controversy or commitment. 'The essence of Conservatism,' he once wrote, 'is not to be found in monetarism or incomes policies - they are both tools of economic management, and it may be necessary to use one more at one time than at another'.

There is something curiously fragmented about Baker's approach. Read his speeches and articles and you will rarely find a connected argument, a sense of an intellect grappling with problems and journeying towards coherent solutions. His speeches have been aptly compared to those of a man drawing on a mixture of old Chinese proverbs and Christmas cracker mottoes.

The contrast with his predecessor, Sir Keith Joseph, is sharp. Joseph presented his policies as a grand strategy for dragging British education into the second half of the 20th century. More clearly than any other postwar education minister, of Left or Right, he grasped that the fundamental weakness of education is its failure to deliver anything for the mass of the population, particularly for what he called 'the bottom 40%'. The new General Certificate of Secondary Education, for all the problems of its implementation, illustrated Joseph's capacity to tackle genuine educational needs: for schoolwork to be more closely related to practical applications, for exams that tested oral as well as writing ability, for an exam system

that set objective standards and, above all, for secondary schooling that offered the large majority of children a taste of success rather than consistent failure.

Towards the end of his term of office, the word went round Tory circles that Joseph, one of the founding intellects of Thatcherism, had become the prisoner of his civil servants at the Department of Education.

No such accusation could be made against Baker. The footwork is dazzling, and sometimes the department huffs and puffs to keep up. Here a national curriculum, there a city technology college, here a new teachers' contract, there 'benchmarks' for literature that children should read by 12 and 15. The ideas come thick and fast; the problem is to give them form and substance.

Baker is that familiar English phenomenon, the arts graduate who has learnt to manage technology without ever really understanding how it works. He was born in 1934; his father was a middle-ranking civil servant in the Ministry of Supply. His grandfather was a socialist and an associate of Keir Hardie and once considered standing for parliament.

After St Paul's and Oxford (where he read modern history) he joined Shell as a graduate trainee, moving later to a small menswear firm and then to a merchant bank. He entered parliament, after winning a by-election in Acton, in 1968. Though he lost the seat in 1970, another by-election took him back to the Commons. He held junior office in the Heath administration but his close association with the fallen leader condemned him to six years in the wilderness after Thatcher's accession.

In the end, he had to write his own job description. In 1981, he sent the prime minister a 10-point plan for an information technology unit, with its own ministry, inside the Department of Industry. Thatcher took the



Kenneth Baker brushing up his image

bait and the papers dubbed him 'the Minister in Charge of the Future'. He presented Dalek-style ultimatums to industry: 'automate or liquidate', 'modernise or specialise'.

Enthusiasms about how the next generation would be 'computer literate' and about the prospects for 'sunrise industries', he echoed Tony Benn in his 'Mintech' phase.

Baker's instincts are expansionist. He ensured that every British school had its micro years ahead of the French; but how the micros were to be used and how such resources as teacher time and software were to be found were problems left for others to work out.

This is typical of the Baker approach. He is good with the spectacular, headline-creating initiative. The plan for 20 city technology colleges, free of local authority control, made him a hero with last year's Tory Party conference. But the damage to comprehensives attended by the majority of children will be incalculable. Good science and maths teachers, already in short supply, may be lost to the colleges. So, if Baker's selection criteria are followed, will the best-motivated pupils - at precisely the time when urban authorities are planning to close schools because of falling rolls and are struggling, in particular, with future A-level provision.

Only now is it clear that industry, which was supposed to sponsor the colleges, also has doubts about the initiative.

Baker has hinted, without ever spelling it out, that the technology colleges are prototypes for the school system of the future. Schools would be run by independent trusts, with funds paid, directly from Whitehall, according to the number of pupils attracted. Thus, the despised local education authorities would be put out of business, schools that failed to recruit pupils would close, parents (through their power to determine school income by their choices) would become the chief arbiters of educational standards. The effect would be to create a market system in education; it would work in the same way as the voucher system.

How ironic that Joseph, the Thatcherite guru, should reject vouchers only for them to be revived in new form by Baker, the supreme pragmatist. But Joseph's cerebral approach demanded coherent solutions that would stand up; he quickly grasped that a 'market' in compulsory education was a logical impossibility. Pragmatists, because they are not interested in placing ideas within a coherent political framework, are more easily seduced by the superficially attractive. •  
*Peter Wilby*