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PRIME MINISTER

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U S Visit - Schools

Lessons for the UK

During my recent trip to north America I visited 20 schools (2 in Toronto {and 18 in Atlanta,} Boston, New York and Washington) met a large number of teachers, heads and administrators and also spent some time talking to children, which I found particularly useful.

William Bennett, the Secretary of Education went out of his way to be kind, hosting a large luncheon party for me in Washington, inviting me as his guest to the Lincoln Day Republican dinner in New York and having his officials make excellent arrangements for school visits.

Raising Standards in Mediocre Schools

Almost all of the schools which I visited had been turned around from being mediocre or bad to being first class. Many of the schools were in Inner City situations; the most interesting were 2 in Atlanta made up entirely of drops-outs and which are part of the Cities and Schools Project and those in District 4 of Harlem which had introduced open enrolment.

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One of these, the Benjamin E Franklin High School which had 3,000-4,000 children was so bad that it was closed down in June 1981. The drop-out rate at the school was 93% and the average attendance rate in the morning was 44% - they were too embarrassed to measure it in the afternoon. The school building which is very large, was reopened in September 1981 with three new schools put into it: a new elementary school (with a first year of 60 children), a small junior high school (210 children) and the first year of a new high school (160 children from either black or Hispanic backgrounds). Admission to the high school was on the basis of people who wanted to succeed. Only 2 of the previous 40 high school staff were retained, and the whole building was renamed the Manhattan Centre for Maths and Science (This was not easy as Senator Moynihan is one of the most distinguished alumni of the former school).

The results have been astonishing. The school has produced graduates for two years: in one 100% and in the other 99% went on to college.

Increasing parental choice

New York City is divided into 32 districts. In 1973 District 4 (East Harlem) was the worst school district in New York. Its reading and maths scores were abysmal and suspensions and absenteeism very high. It was ranked 32nd out of the 32 districts.

Two new people were appointed as Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent with the following philosophy:

- (a) each school must stand for something: it must have a distinct theme or philosophy, communicate its vision to parents and children, and have staff, parents,

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administrators and pupils all committed to make it work. Existing school themes include maths, humanities, environmental science, performing arts, social science, creative arts, health and bio-medical studies.

- (b) small schools are better than large schools: some New York elementary schools had 1,700 pupils and some high schools 4,000; it was noticed that no private schools were anywhere near this size. The critical advantage of smaller schools is that the staff can know the children more personally and intimately. The ideal size of school appear to be

Elementary : 200-400 pupils

Intermediary : 180-200 pupils

High : 1000 pupils maximum

- (c) extending ownership of a school is critical: heads, teachers, children and parents must feel that the school is theirs. Ownership can be extended through choice.

Parental choice is an important step in ownership. Instead of being assigned to a school parents have chosen it. Choice by teachers is just as important. And for the same reason. Greater autonomy for heads, who can then impose their own ethos and create their own dreams is also critical.

"When children and parents are given a choice in selecting their own school out of several alternatives, the children's interest and motivation for learning is significantly increased and the school

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is better able to develop interest and raise achievement."

Building upon these principles they started in a small way in the mid-seventies. They established new schools each with a well defined interest with small numbers but in existing buildings. Typically they have more than one school in a building. They realised however that each step they took had to be successful. Then in 1982 and building now on an increasingly successful track record they created open enrolment across the whole area. Today there are 49 schools in 20 buildings. Each school has a distinctive quality. Standards have risen, and schools are over-subscribed, even though there is still need to strive for greater achievement.

Major lessons from the visit

1. Confirmation of UK policies

1. The visits to schools and the numerous conversations were strong confirmation that our reforms in the UK, namely,

- greater autonomy for individual schools;
- extension of parental choice;
- a core curriculum in basic subjects and testing for attainment

are absolutely the right direction in which to go. These are the features of all the good schools which I saw and are very much at the heart of What Works in America.

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Many Americans I met were envious of our radical reforms.

2. Role of heads

The single most important factor in successful schools is outstanding leadership. First class heads with high standards and obvious leadership qualities will not tolerate bad behaviour, poor exam results, drugs or violence in their schools.

Every school which I visited, and every school which I was told about had a first class head. While the appointment of a first class head may not be sufficient to create a first class school it is certainly a necessary first step.

I observed that these heads all had the following qualities:

- they tended to be strong, if anything slightly authoritarian, personalities but who had easy relationships with staff and who knew their pupils' names;
- they had very clear and explicit goals for their school;
- they welcomed publicity and were natural communicators;
- they all were strong on discipline: without an orderly environment, learning they said could not take place;
- even though not all were magnet or very academic schools, nevertheless they all emphasised the importance of producing academic results, even for children of modest ability.

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3. Greater Choice

The lessons which emerge from open choice are:

- every school can obtain good children providing it can show it has something distinctive to offer and is striving to improve its results; there is no logical inevitability to sink schools;
- parental choice will quickly show up the weakness of the existing system, but choice left to itself will not remedy these weaknesses;
- the creation of better schools requires the appointment of new heads, possessing strong leadership qualities and with clear ideas of how to differentiate their schools from others.

Suggestions for the UK

Crucial to the successful implementation of the Education Bill will be:

- (a) the appointment of the right kinds of heads and senior teachers to run schools in the new environment which the Bill will create;
- (b) the need for new people and new attitudes in LEAs to do for this country the kind of things those two administrators have done for District 4 in New York.

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This has one very important implication for central government.

When the Bill becomes an Act we cannot rely on greater choice automatically raising standards in less successful schools.

We need to prepare and encourage governors to appoint certain kinds of people who are rather different from many traditional heads. We need heads with clear qualities of leadership, enterprise and communication skills, who are at home having greater accountability to parents, whose academic results are published and who need to exercise strong discipline. And we need administrators who can facilitate this change and help back up these appointments.

This is a tall order. But crucial if our reforms are to work.

In order to make this happen we need a hands-on approach in managing change. We might try the following:

- (a) The Secretary of State, accompanied by say three first class businessmen, (e.g. head of McKinsey, Rayner etc) could hold one-day regional seminars for Chief Education Officers and their deputies to impress on them the new style of leadership which the public is looking for, the ways in which potential leadership may be selected and encouraged.

It would be crucial not to involve HMI, academics or traditional administrators.

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- (b) Partly as a result of this exercise, but also in addition to it, the Secretary of State could produce literature geared especially to leadership in schools which would then be available for all heads, deputy heads, heads of year, etc as well as administrators throughout the country.

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