

POWER TO THE PEOPLE!

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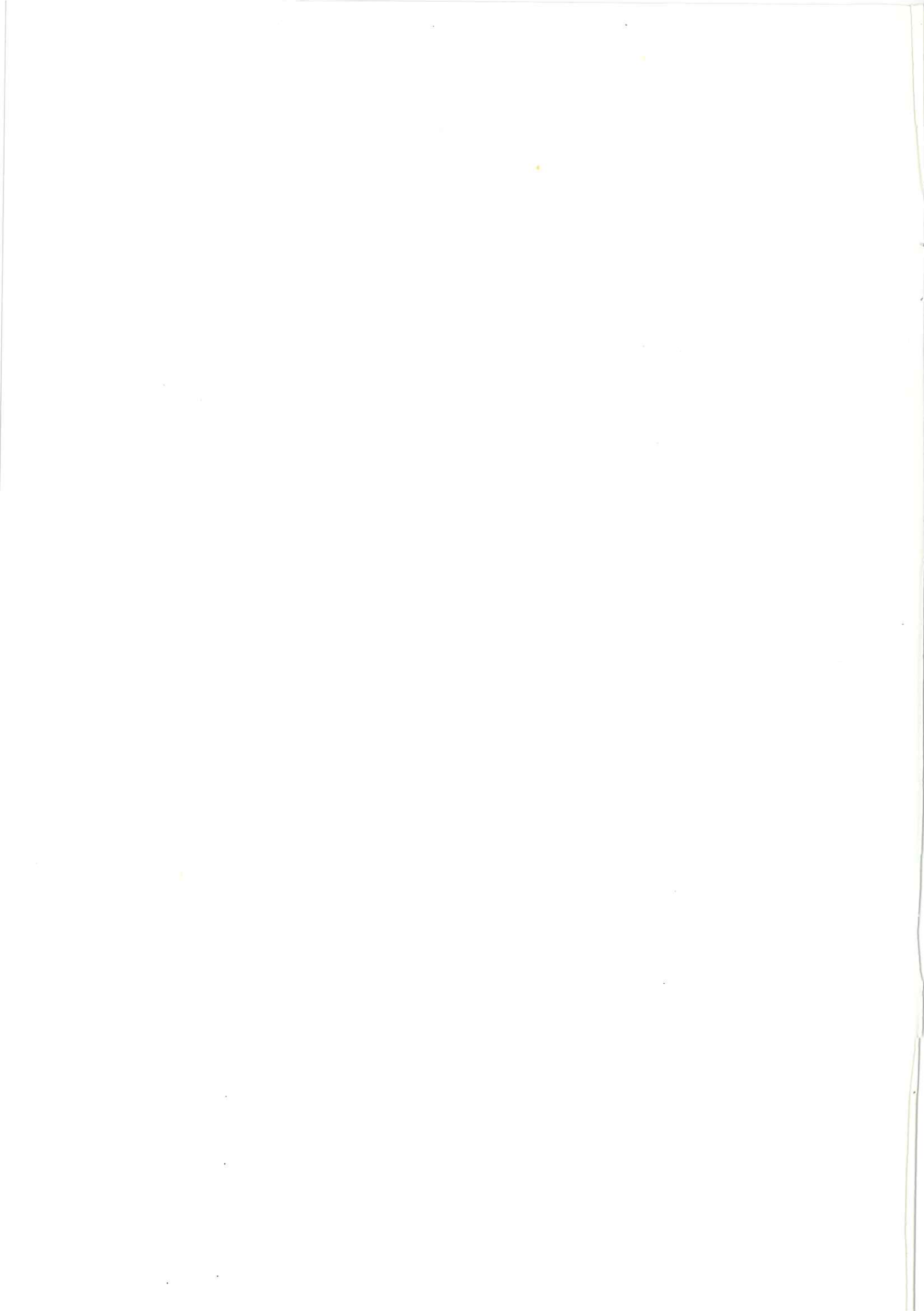
A policy For better state schools
 For more and wider parental choice
 For more value for money in education
 For more and more accessible independent schools

Parents have one great superiority over the Government or the administrators of (school) endowments. Their faults are mainly the corrigible faults of ignorance, not of apathy or prejudice. They have and feel the greatest interest in doing that which is for the real benefit of their children. They are the representatives of the present, the living and acting energy of a nation, which has ever owed its sure and onward progress more to individual efforts than to public control and direction. They have the wish to arrive at a true conclusion, the data are before them, they must be the judges in the last resort, why should we shrink from making them judges at once?

- Sir Robert Lowe, Chancellor of the Exchequer under Gladstone, speaking in 1869.

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I WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

It is neither a new nor a difficult notion. Education vouchers, perhaps better called education allowances, are an old and simple suggestion. Yet it is a suggestion offering quite enormous promise. There is no doubt that today and in our country this idea is an idea whose time has come.

Its first proposer seems to have been Tom Paine. To the contemporary reader the relevant passage from The Rights of Man (1791) sounds quaint. Yet it makes the heart of the matter quite clear. For the state to ensure that some basic service such as schooling is available to all who need it, it is sufficient that everyone should have the means to buy that service. It is neither necessary nor even desirable that the service itself should always be provided directly by the state; much less that that provision should become a state monopoly.

Arguing that "A nation under a well-regulated government should permit none to remain uninstructed", Paine urged the payment "...to every poor family ... of four pounds a year for every child under fourteen years; enjoining the parents of such children to send them to school, to learn reading, writing and common arithmetic..."¹ An example to all subsequent proposers of reform, he proceeded straightway: both to work out what taxes would be needed to finance this proposal and to indicate administrative means of ensuring that his education allowances would in fact be spent, as intended, on elementary schooling.

Fundamentally the same idea - providing public funds for the private purchase of services which may themselves be supplied independently - was revived in John Stuart Mill's classic essay On Liberty (1859). There, in the context of an attack on state monopoly in education as the greatest possible threat to the freedom of the individual, Mill wrote:-

"Were the duty of enforcing universal education once admitted... If the government would make up its mind to require for every child a good education, it might save itself the trouble of providing one. It might leave to parents to obtain the education where and how they pleased, and content itself with helping to pay the school fees of the poorer classes of children, and defraying the entire school expenses of those who have no one else to pay for them." (2)

In the twenties of our century, after most school education had come to be supplied by state-maintained institutions controlled through Local Education Authorities (LEA s), there was a campaign which at that time came to nothing. It was led by Cardinal Bourne. His very reasonable concern was that parents who wanted their children to attend independent Roman Catholic schools should not be required to pay twice over: once as ordinary taxpayers financing the state system; and then again to support an independent school - something which in any case a large proportion of those parents simply could not afford to do.

The latest revival of the same good old idea, and its present rapidly growing popularity both in Britain and in several other countries, began with the publication in the USA during the early sixties of Milton Friedman Capitalism and Freedom.³ It was this book which introduced the expression 'education voucher'. The point was, and is, that the allowances should be given not in cash but in the form of a voucher. These vouchers would all have a nominal cash value, though they could be cashed only by the schools to which the parents paid them.

The cash value of the vouchers - what the schools would get for them in pounds and pence - might from time to time be changed; it might or might not be taxed as part of the income of the parents; and it could and presumably would, vary with the age and other characteristics of the child. (The costs of primary and of secondary schooling are very different, while everyone would surely want more money to be spent on blind or otherwise severely handicapped children.)

It is clear that there are many possibilities of variation in detail. But other and far more important features are common to everything deserving to be called a voucher scheme. It is essential that parents be free to choose to remove both their children and their vouchers from one school in order to take them to another. It is equally essential that the incomes of the schools should increase with the admission, and decrease with the withdrawal, of every voucher-paying pupil. A voucher scheme must of its very nature give power and choice to the parents. It gives it: not to a few of their (our) more or less remote, supposed representatives; but to each and every individual parent, beholden to no one outside their own families. It also exposes the schools - above all their crucial teaching staff - to the disciplines and opportunities of the market. The teachers

become, or become again, like other traditional professionals. They are thus much more directly employed by, and hence accountable to, their true clients: not, that is, the central state; nor yet the LEA's; but the parents.

Whereas Paine and Mill were thinking of education allowances only for the poor, and whereas Cardinal Bourne was primarily concerned for Roman Catholics, all contemporary advocates want to move more or less rapidly to a fully comprehensive system - publicly financed education vouchers for all parents or guardians of school age children.

We are, therefore, prepared to consider the different device of education tax credits only as a possible and strictly temporary means to this unexclusive end. (For an account of that different device, and a suggestion as to how it might be employed to smooth the way to a fully and ideally comprehensive voucher system, see the Appendix, below.) In order that all parents should benefit, directly and from the beginning, the values of the vouchers would have to be set, at least in the first instance, very close to the average costs of the appropriate sort of place within the state-maintained sector. For all parents with children in these schools must continue to have the right to go on sending their children to the same schools without any question of any demand for supplementary payments. The whole point of introducing any voucher scheme precisely is to give parents powers and choices which they do not now possess. It would, therefore, be a nonsense so to arrange it that many or indeed any parents were deprived of the option of continuing in ways in which they have been and are perfectly content.

II NOW? AND WHAT ABOUT COST?

It is said that when a friend called the poet W.B. Yeats to tell him that he had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, and to say what an honour this was both for him and for Ireland, his only response was a single, earthily reiterated question: "How much? How much?"

Many will be inclined to respond in the same way to the present proposal. Certainly the big idea of education vouchers - with its promises of more power, choice and responsibility for individual families as well as of a more truly professional status for teachers - is one which can

scarcely fail to possess the strongest appeal to Conservatives; to say nothing of its equal appeal to such classical and unfashionably unsocialist Liberals as Jo Grimond. But Conservatives are bound to raise two immediate objections. First, since - whether rightly or wrongly - this was not one of the (rather few) specific proposals of our 1983 manifesto, perhaps the whole question should be deferred for three or four years? Second, a comprehensive scheme would surely cost a lot of money- and one overriding priority for the present parliament must be to achieve more success than the last in reducing the cut of the national income taken by public expenditure; and, hence, taxes.

On the first point, the Prime Minister's answers at the June 6 Conservative Campaign Press Conference should be decisive. Asked whether the party, if elected, would do only what was in the manifesto she replied: "No, of course not," going on to explain that it laid down only the broad general lines, the policy aims and the philosophy. On the second point, we shall develop the argument that this proposal offers the only real hope of getting much more value for money than we have in fact been getting, of achieving a greater and better educational output for a resource input the same or smaller. Indeed we do not believe that the general policy objectives of the manifesto can be attained, or its philosophy fulfilled, without implementing both this and other similar proposals in other areas.

Certainly to introduce our sort of scheme would require an immediate increase in public educational spending in one direction. This increase would be in the amount of the total cost of vouchers for those parents who are at present educating their children independently, as well as paying their share of the taxes to finance the education of everyone else's children. But, first, just because the minority going private is so small now, that increase expressed as a percentage has to be correspondingly small. (The figure is in fact between five and six per cent of all schoolchildren.⁴ But, second and far more important, to start a voucher scheme is to begin to introduce competition and the disciplines of the market into what has become, and is, a bureaucratic and state monopolistic system. All experience shows that there is no surer way of raising efficiency, and getting better value for money. So we have every reason to be confident that that small percentage increase could be rapidly be offset by more than compensating decreases.

Indeed the case for a voucher scheme on grounds of cost effectiveness alone is overwhelmingly strong; quite apart from all our more philosophical

considerations of power to the people, parental choice, truly professional service, and so on. Over the last thirty years, from the early fifties to the early eighties, public expenditure under the general budget heading 'Education' has in real terms multiplied roughly four times; while the proportion of the national income spent in this way has roughly doubled. Yet, almost unbelievably, no one has even tried to show that this vast growth in resource input has been rewarded by any corresponding or more than corresponding increase in educational output.⁵

Again, we do know that there are very wide variations in per capita spending in the same types of school, both within single LEA's and between one LEA and another, and that these differences do not appear to correlate with differences in the quality or quantity of the educational services provided. The ILEA, for instance, with the highest per capita spending in the country, still regularly produces, but labours hard to conceal, some of the worst results.⁶ One recent, wry index of the present general and scandalous indifference within the educational establishment to questions of cost-effectiveness was a report of Her Majesty's Inspectors, pillorying four originally unnamed LEA's. These were to be in the doghouse: not because they were producing below average results; but because they were achieving whatever they were achieving with a below average resource input!

There is also some comparative evidence to suggest that in education too - as well as in rubbish disposal and other municipal affairs - we all pay dear for direct labour, that a drive for privatisation would better serve the public. Partly because the private sector in education is small, and partly because so many of the schools in that sector are boarding schools, more of this comparative evidence comes from the USA than from the UK. In California, for instance, annual per capita costs in the state schools are over \$3,000, comparing with less than \$1,500 in the private; while in those cheaper independent schools the otherwise most disadvantaged children achieve markedly better academic results than their opposite numbers in California's maintained schools.⁷ It is with good reason that CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, has adopted education vouchers as a main plank in its campaign platform- while there are signs already that here too this policy would do more than anything else to recapture the vital Asian vote for the Conservatives. (Some members of these groups would like to set up Muslim, Sikh or Hindu parochial schools; while many blacks would like independent schools with a harsher and more effective discipline. In both cases, provided always that

these new schools were not to become racially exclusive, why ever not?)

In Britain consider first some general points: notice that our independent schools have no expensive administrative and advisory top-hamper outside and above the individual institutions; and recall the tip of the old Inspector who claimed that you could always tell the private schools by noticing where the lights were switched out first! Some more particular figures for the British state system are £778 per year in primary school, £1,026 for 11-16 year olds, and £1,606 for sixth formers. But these are only the recoupment prices for 1982/83 charged by one LEA to another. To get the full costs, you have to add on about 20%. This covers capital expenditure and debt charges; national and local administration of (but outside) the schools; and so on.

If we compare such adjusted figures with the fees charged by, for instance, Foxbush School in Kent we can infer, modestly, that voucher holders wanting to go independent will not need to top up their vouchers with very much, if anything, from their private pockets. Foxbush is an independent day school for boys, owned and run by a consortium of teachers, and it accepts all comers without selection. It charges £1,035 per year for juniors (8-11), £1,350 for the middle school (11-16), and £1,395 for the sixth form.⁸

III HOW SHOULD THE MONEY BE PAID?

At present education accounts for between 50 and 60% of local authority budgets. But less than half of this money comes from the rates. The rest is drawn from the centrally funded Rate Support Grants, the total of which is less, but not much less, than the total of all local education spending. Among the proposals put to a secret Cabinet committee investigating ways to reorganise local government finance, and to reduce the burden of the rates, there is said to be one from the Department of Education and Science (DES).⁹ This would apparently involve both increasing the amount contributed from central funds and increasing the control of the DES over the LEA s.

This proposal is on the second count obnoxious: both because such an increase of central control over education must be inconsistent with the general ideals of a liberal society; and because the recent track record of this particular ministry has made it all too obvious how wretchedly any such

extra power would be both used and not used. But a centrally funded voucher scheme would, by contrast, be radically decentralising and libertarian. The voucher money, sufficient surely to run all locally necessary schools, would go direct to the parents. If they chose to spend their vouchers on LEA maintained schools, as no doubt for a long time most would, then well and fine. If the LEA wanted to spend still more on its education, then that more, yet only that more, would have to come from the rates. And, since most of the other services presently provided by local authorities could then be financed out of the rates without any, or without many and massive, subventions from the centre, the rest of local government could become much more genuinely autonomous and local.

Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education and Science, while emphasising that he had as yet no plans for the general introduction of a voucher scheme, recently asked his department to produce a discussion paper on the difficulties and the implications. Although this document has not yet been printed, copies were freely circulated to various interested parties. It is, therefore, a public document; and one produced by the DES rather than, or even as opposed to, the Minister. So it makes good sense for the rest of this pamphlet to take the form of a series of answers to these objections, especially since this will also reveal some of the grounds for preferring parent power to DES power.

The title of this document was, simply, Education Vouchers. For reasons which will soon become apparent we prefer to substitute the mischievous nickname No, Minister - abbreviated to NM, the subsequent numbers being of its paragraphs. It is remarkable, and a depressing indication of the quality of the advice given by civil servants to the political chiefs in that department, that the presumably plural authors appear never to have heard of this idea before the advent of their current political masters. Even now they show no willingness to consult any non-official sources. They give no definition of the expression 'education voucher'. And they prefer to speculate on what reasons supporters might offer - rather than to go to the trouble of reading any of the abundant, accessible but unofficial literature. Above all they seem to be keen to kill the whole idea rather than to use their skills to help solve the administrative problems. Not for nothing has a Conservative former Minister of Education felt he had to give

warning about self-interested and politically partisan advice from the DES.¹⁰

IV WHAT ABOUT STANDARDS?

The authors of No, Minister offer four conjectures as to what might "be in the proponents' minds". The first two objectives thus distinguished are really one, that "vouchers might be a means of increasing parental choice"; while the third is that "vouchers might be a means of making schools more accountable to parents". Fourth comes the suggestion that advocates of the voucher might think that "the increase of choice and accountability should tend to raise educational standards" (NM3).

(i) Certainly this first DES conjecture is, like the other two, correct. Equally certainly, if either God or Man gives any person a choice, then there can be no guarantee that that choice will be made as someone else would have preferred to see it made. Nevertheless we do in fact have good reason to believe that, in the real world of Britain today and tomorrow, parental choice and parental power would make for a general and substantial rise in levels of educational achievement. The contemporary onslaught on such achievement, and especially upon the independent assessment of standards actually achieved, manifestly does not come from parents qua parents.

Instead it comes, and it is coming all the time, from professing and ostensibly professional educationists, with the ear and in the eye of the national media. It is coming from Colleges and Departments of Education, especially that at the Open University preaching from its radio pulpits the damnation of capitalism and the impossibility of objective knowledge.¹¹ It is coming from the Executive and the Conferences of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) - most especially, before the Minister's constructive destruction of that quango, through the NUT dominated Schools Council.¹² And it is coming perhaps above all from the Procrustean intelligentsia, insisting that no one may on any account be so unequal as to do or to be better than anyone else.¹³

The truth is that most concerned parents, and most parents are concerned, want their children to be taught, among other things, what will qualify them for good jobs. Hence they also want the learning achievements of those children to be independently certificated by organisations which potential employers can trust - neither by CSE Mode III unsupported, that is, nor by Pupil Profiles if these too are unsupported by external and independent evidence.

For with both of these last, teachers will or would be tendering their uncorroborated testimony to - among other things - the effectiveness of their own teaching!

Consider for a moment perhaps the worst scandal to have been uncovered in British education during the decade of the seventies, the case of the ILEA's William Tyndale School. There it was the parents "who wanted their children to be learnt to read", and the 'teachers' who insisted that nowadays "the workers' class have no need for literacy". No doubt the British people have changed a lot since the days of the Newcastle Commission, and no doubt too in many ways for the worse. But none of us are in any hurry to reject the substance of this conclusion: "It is a subject of wonder how people so destitute of education as labouring parents commonly are, can be such just judges, as they commonly are, of the effective qualities of a teacher."

(ii) Again, moving up to a rather less elementary level, we find that the authors of No, Minister discern in the voucher idea all manner of threats for what, on the whole, well contents them as a generally satisfactory status quo. Would so revolutionary an innovation, they ask, "be compatible with efficient staffing...?" They continue:-

"Would there not still be problems over subjects in which there was a shortage of qualified teachers and over minority subjects? More generally the quality and scope of the school curriculum is a matter of great national importance and its improvement is very much the concern of all those affected by it. How far would parental preference for what schools offered coincide with the needs of employers, and indeed of the pupils themselves? These questions have large implications for both the school curriculum and the present balance of responsibilities for it" (NM 12).

Most certainly they do. But these large implications all point starkly to the need for drastic change. The smug, official contentment of No, Minister would be breathtaking, were it not so entirely familiar. For all the impact they have had on the DES, the Black Papers might as well have been left unwritten.¹⁴ It is hard to decide where to open the attack upon a complacency so all-embracing.

Let us take first their own first mention of "efficient staffing", and consider the "large implications" of a recent independent study of the complete A-level results of 90 ILEA comprehensive schools. This study covers virtually all the comprehensive schools fully maintained by that authority. For reasons

easy to conjecture the ILEA, like most LEA's and like the NUT, opposed and still opposes the publication of any such results broken down school by school; an opposition which we hope that the 1980 Education Act will effectively override. In appraising these particular results we all need to bear in mind two remarks made by Her Majesty's Inspectors in what was originally intended to be a secret report on Educational Provision by the ILEA: "pupil/teacher ratios ... are among the lowest in the country"; while "ILEA schools have more money to spend pro rata than anywhere else in the country".¹⁵

So what do we discover? Do we find that "in subjects in which there was a shortage of qualified teachers" those available were teaching classes of above-average size, recruited partly through pupil transfers from schools unable to provide adequate teaching in these subjects? Certainly this is what would happen if parents with vouchers in their hands were able to shop around for the schools which could and would teach whatever, and as much as, their children were able and willing to learn. But this is not - surprise, surprise! - how it is now:

"Out of these 90 schools, there were 36 schools with no A-level French or Geography, 28 without any Physics, 25 without Chemistry, 22 without Maths, and 20 without Biology ... There were 971 separate A-level courses available in these 90 schools ... In 213 (22%) of these 971 courses nobody passed and in another 246 (25%) only 1 person passed. So almost half (47%) of the A-level courses in these schools had either 1 pass or no passes at all. Also in more than a third - 34% or 35% - of these courses only 1 or 2 pupils entered. On average in all the schools 4.8 pupils entered in each subject and 2.7 pupils passed ... Perhaps the most amazing figure of all is that nearly a half of all the subject groups in ... 8 major subjects had 2 entries or less ... The proportion of schools with such unviable groups was nearly 70% in French, more than 60% in Geography, about 50% in Physics and Chemistry and about 40% in Biology, History and Maths."¹⁶

Think for a moment of all those anonymous yet naturally able sons and daughters of unprosperous homes who, before the late, triumphant dissolution of maintained selective schools, would have attended these; but who have since - in order that all may be ground down to a socialist-approved equality - been confined to some wretched neighbourhood school. Many such schools, as we see

here, are offering no A-level teaching in any foreign language, or in mathematics, or in physics and chemistry.

Now, after that penitential reflection, pity us all as we struggle to compete with countries determined to train every talent with which their peoples are born. "One thing is certain", as Dr Rhodes Boyson concluded recently, "if the egalitarian educational tide ... is not swept back we could become a card-carrying member of the Third World before the next generation goes to school."¹⁷

(iii) The authors of No, Minister proceed to profess anxiety about the possible threat from parental choice to "the quality and scope of the school curriculum ... a matter of great national importance"; and they ask in some show of concern whether such choice could "coincide with the needs of employers" (NM12). Who would ever guess, reading this, either that there is in fact no centrally prescribed core curriculum; or that many liberals in all parties might be very uneasy about any proposal thus to increase central control over education? Who would ever guess either, what is much more unequivocally unacceptable, that the 40% of all our children who take neither GCE nor CSE are all permitted to leave school without submitting to any externally assessed examinations? There is, therefore, no sure means of telling what, if anything, these boys and girls have in all their years of compulsory education actually learnt - or, in particular, how many of them are going out into the world even minimally literate and minimally numerate. How, please, are we supposed to reconcile these facts with prim professions of concern for the needs of employers and employment?

How too, and more generally, can anyone pretend devotion to the education of all our children if they are not pressing for a fully comprehensive system of monitoring what actually is being taught, and learnt? Sir Keith Joseph, who does very obviously feel this generous Conservative concern, is currently investigating ways of remedying that neglect of the bottom 40%. Pupil profiles for all would surely be good; but not, repeat not, if these were - as the NUT so characteristically and so urgently demands - to be allowed to replace all independently assessed cross-checks upon the judgements of each pupil's own teachers.

Again we have here something which parent power must tend to promote rather than to prevent. Parents, and especially perhaps working class parents, want their children to acquire qualifications which will carry weight with possible employers. But, with persons of sense, weight is carried only by tests independently assessed, and by other evidence corroborated by such tests. It is not parents but teachers or, we must hope, trades union officials misrepresenting teachers, who denounce "separate examinations, designed for pupils of different ability ranges" as "divisive, and hence educationally indefensible"; and who go on without a blush to advocate a single system where "There would be no artificial division between 'pass' and 'fail'".¹⁸

V THE ADMINISTRATIVE PROBLEMS OF A MARKET FOR EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

Whatever the truth about the subject of Section 4, there certainly are, and no doubt always will be, parents and other guardians who cannot be trusted to make the best decisions— just as there are, and again presumably always will be, teachers, local government officers, and even civil servants of whom the same might be said. It is entirely proper, and truly Conservative, to be concerned to protect children from the folly or fecklessness of their parents— or, for that matter, of anyone else.

But there is absolutely no reason to fear that under the voucher any children would become worse off than they are now. For the indifference and irresponsibility of bad parents would surely be manifested in failure to take the mildly troublesome initiative of transferring their children from their present bad school to one better, rather than in labouring to seek out a worse! Those same bad schools, from which the good parents were not beginning to withdraw their children, would for the first time be under mind-concentrating pressure either to buck up or shut down.

(i) The authors of No, Minister seem quite unable to recognise the salutary promise of such pressures. Forced, however tacitly, to admit that there actually are within the maintained system many educational institutions from which, given half a chance, parents would rush to withdraw their conscript children, these DES officials insist that, under a voucher system, most if not all such lamentable schools would find themselves helplessly and hopelessly

trapped "in a spiral of falling standards and further enforced contraction" (NM11). This is, of course, quite unrealistic. It is not only in matters of literal life and death that the threat of imminent execution "concentrates the mind wonderfully". It is not every firm, nor even the majority of firms, which, facing a sharp fall in sales, feebly fails to fight back to recovery. Even these Tyndale Trots might well have been quick to mend their ways if only the helpless parents had instead possessed the power, without any embarrassing confrontations, quietly to remove both their children and their childrens' funding. If not, or even if so, the ILEA would surely have been stirred more quickly to take more effective remedial action.¹⁹ (It scarcely could have been more slow or less effective than it actually was!)

Instead, it appears that - the promise of the 1980 Education Act notwithstanding - such sink schools are to be kept going at all costs (at all costs, that is, to everyone except their internal staffs and the controlling outside bureaucracies). Sufficient enrolments are to be maintained by conscripting children in whatever numbers the appropriate officials may deem to be necessary.

It would be hard to uncover a better - or, more precisely, a worse - illustration of the way in which, freed from market disciplines, state industries tend to be run for the benefit of their managers and of their employees rather than for that of the public to which they are supposed to be supplying good or services (that same public which, whether directly or indirectly, always pays). At which point someone is bound to protest: 'It is a right-wing, almost Thatcherite outrage to propose treating the supply of educational services as one might treat the supply of TV sets, cars, or tins of baked beans!' A moment's thought would show such protesters that they had got everything upside down. Nevertheless, as A.E. Housman once remarked, although "Three minutes thought would suffice to find this out ... thought is irksome, and three minutes is a long time."²⁰

How crazily topsy turvy it is to be prepared or even eager to see irreformably incompetent producers of TV sets or cars driven to the wall; while insisting that - because education is, as it is, so vastly more important - incompetent or insubordinate suppliers of educational services shall be kept in business, and continually provided with conscript customers on whom to do their worst. So it is that thoughtless protestor's protest which is upside down. Nor is it our "almost Thatcherite" insistence which is the authentic

outrage. Rather the outrage is the stubborn complacency of the DES authors. No doubt in this they represent faithfully the entire educational establishment, both bureaucratic and trades union. They do indeed recognise that they are presently maintaining a lot of bad schools, schools discontenting those who have to use them. They insist also - often, we believe, much too pessimistically - that such shocking schools cannot or will not by any means either reform themselves or be reformed. Yet they still refuse to contemplate "enforced contraction".

(ii) They are equally wooden and unimaginative about the possibilities of responding positively to surges of customer demand. There is a mention of the requirement in the 1980 Act that parental "choices be met unless they would lead to inefficient use of resources" (NM7). Later, discussing the voucher alternative, they allow it to emerge that this proviso will in fact be used to disallow any substantial movements either to or from any existing maintained schools. So almost all the intolerable deal of time and effort currently invested in the newly extended appeals procedures must be, by these constraints, doomed to frustration: scarcely any parental appeals can in the end be allowed.

The problems which to the authors of No, Minister seem so intractable are all and only of the kind which greengrocers, publishers, appliance manufacturers, professional partnerships and other more humble suppliers of goods and services have to make, and usually succeed in making, in order to meet the sometimes unpredictably changing demands of a paying public. They are all such as can be eased if not immediately and fully solved only at the apparently unthinkable price of revising or revoking certain established laws or regulations, of abandoning or altering certain present practices.

Contrast with this the inertial approach favoured in the DES treatment of "the obstacles now in the way of maintaining or creating ... spare capacity in the right places and at the level demanded" (NM8). "The ebb and flow of children at will", they go on to observe, "could create difficult management and organisational problems for schools, at least in the short term" (NM8 iii). Then, of course, there are the "Education (School Premises) Regulations 1981". These "place an upper limit on the number of children which may be accommodated at popular schools". They "may also constrain the possibility of extending capacity by the addition of mobile classrooms" (NM8 ii). But for these DES officials the final horror is parent power as such: "a voucher system could lead to a situation in which parental choices and decisions determined the

character of the maintained school system" (NM10).

Certainly there are several regulations and even some laws which will need to be either amended or abrogated if a voucher system is to be launched. But, if this is an objection to such a scheme, then it must be an objection equally to any and every other major innovation. Certainly too, as in any market situation, changes in demand not merely could but will "create difficult management and organisational problems". So what are Heads and other managers paid and well paid for, if it is not to solve sometimes difficult management and organisational problems?

On the expansion side, the difficulty of such problems for the schools is in any case being obtusely exaggerated. The DES writers do recognise the possibility of moving in mobile classrooms, even if only to dismiss it as cabined and constrained by current rules and regulations (NM8 ii). Yet they have, it appears, neither heard nor thought of the possibility of employing the same plant for two shifts; this has for years been successfully done by such perennially popular schools as Stuyvesant High in the Lower East Side of the Borough of Manhattan.

On the contraction side, No, Minister is characteristically, and one suspects wilfully, blind to the positive promise of the voucher. Because of the overall fall in rolls consequent upon the earlier fall in the birthrate, for the next few years this side will and should be the more important. Since a lot of schools are going to have to be shut down, how much better it would be to have the decisions on which are to go, and which are to stay and even perhaps to expand, made by the voucher votes of all the parents concerned. The alternative is to have these decisions made as in the public sector they are now usually made. They emerge, that is, as the often irrational and incomprehensible resultant of backstage bureaucracy - bureaucracy tempered by party politicking and activist protest. Between these alternative decision procedures the choice is, in an Ancient Greek understanding, critical. The sense in which you make it shows who you are. Are you truly a democrat, wanting power to the people? Or are you a socialist and an authoritarian, wanting power for for the party activists or for the officials?

Here and everywhere else in what Tom Lehrer loves to call Edbiz we should all remember the finding of one of the best bits of policy-related research to be published in recent years; a finding which rigorously confirms what all of us working at the chalkface have all along believed that we knew.

Michael Rutter and his colleagues reported that factors such as school size, age of building, and space available, made little or no difference to educational results: "It was entirely possible for schools to obtain good outcomes in spite of ... unpromising and unprepossessing school premises ...". What, by contrast, was crucial was "their characteristics as social institutions. Factors as varied as the degree of academic emphasis, teacher actions in lessons ... the extent to which children were able to take responsibility were all significantly associated with outcome differences between schools. All of these factors were open to modification by the staff, rather than fixed by external constraints".²¹

(iii) Following on this insistence, that it is above all the true professionalism of the teaching staff which matters, it is worth emphasising that a voucher scheme would be bound progressively to increase the effective independence of maintained schools. More decisions, especially financial decisions, would come to be taken inside, and fewer outside, the individual schools. Providing always that these schools were, as they would be, effectively subjected to market disciplines by the voucher-paying parents this could result in nothing but good. Let us take a relatively minor but recently topical example. Under such a regime you would surely never find telephone bills running out of control while there was a ban on buying any fresh books for the school library.

More importantly, most LEAs would presumably want to take some cut from the vouchers paid into their schools to meet, or help to meet, administrative and other costs external to those schools. We foresee the inevitable consequent conflicts over the share out of these income resource claims as constituting a permanent and salutary check on costs; and especially on those external costs which are now least visible, and hence least controlled. For staffs in the schools, and parents too, would know exactly how much of the funding coming from central government was being taken from their school to be, as they would surely believe, wasted on seemingly superfluous external expenditures. Increasing exasperation would surely lead many to seek ways of going fully independent. Committed as we are to the values of independence and self-reliance, believing as we do that it is overdue to start rolling back the frontiers of the state, and that small is more often than not beautiful, we should welcome and work to encourage all such explorations.

VI CHANGING THE SYSTEM: HOW MANY TRANSFERS, HOW MUCH UPSET?

In general, No, Minister tends to underestimate the amount of inter-school movement likely at the beginning of any sudden introduction of a comprehensive national voucher scheme, while overestimating the amount likely once things settled down.

(i) The authors underestimate in the former case because they rely on studies of preferences expressed by parents both in a very good area and lacking the vital performance information about the schools in that area; information which all maintained schools are now, under the new 1980 Education Act, going at last to be forced to provide. No one in the DES, and precious few outside, seems to have appreciated the importance of this provision- or to have accorded the then minister, Mark Carlisle, proper credit for forcing it through against the "total opposition" both of the NUT and of all the rest of the compulsory comprehensive, supply side lobby. Yet most of these opponents were in a position to know how bad things often are. They will have seen plenty of the sort of formerly secret data cited in Section 4 (ii) above. It was presumably just because they did know, that they were so determined that the parents and the public should not!²²

The officials of the DES have failed grievously in their duty by not giving to their political masters most urgent warning of the explosions of public discontent to be expected once our usually wideawake and conscientious local media begin to publish all these often spectacularly various public examination results, with some comparative analyses, and with the names and addresses of the particular schools in which these results were achieved. The National Council for Educational Standards (NCES) has sponsored and hopes very soon to publish a study of the 1981 examination results for more than 2,000 schools and 350,000 fifth year pupils. Pausing only to underline the giveaway fact that it was left to an independent and entirely unofficial body to sponsor this research, let us anticipate that full publication by presenting what are from our present point of view the two most significant findings.

These both concern the correlation or, rather, the lack of correlation between resource input and educational output. They therefore provide support for our contention that there is plenty of scope for getting much better value for money; an end to which a competitive market is the supremely effective means. "Levels of expenditure provided another consistent correlation," the researchers report, "but one which was persistently negative related to examination attainment." Very properly they proceed to explain that and how "the situation is complex". Yet they cannot avoid the conclusion that, "although great caution is needed in interpreting the data on expenditure, ... investment of money per se does not result in better performance as far as attainment in examinations is concerned."

Again, on teacher-pupil ratios they note that "The correlations here are not uniformly positive or negative." They comment: "This in itself is interesting." It is indeed. For years politicians as well as trades union and other officials have been in the habit of simply identifying increases in expenditure, and in particular what are always without evidence or argument called improvements in teacher-pupil ratios, with educational advance. "One may conclude", with these researchers, "that although there may be some situations in which smaller classes may be associated with better results, there is no strong or unequivocal relationship between (such ratios) and success in examinations. Nor, we may add, does anyone appear able, or even eager, to offer any hard evidence to show that the smaller classes always or usually produce other educational goods, not measurable in this way."

(ii) The authors of No, Minister also overestimate the amount of transfer likely once things have settled down. This is because they take no account of the dynamics of the whole operation. To fail to do this is, as we have throughout urged, to ignore the bracing and reformatory effect of market pressures on schools and teachers; and even officials. Until some entire country, or some entire US state, has run a voucher system for a few years the best we can do to enforce this conclusion is to look at the actual operation of other markets. When we do, we see that mass movements from one supplier to another are very rare, especially where the alternative supplier is far away from home. What happens is that people change in ones and twos. The mass movements are usually forestalled by timely reactions from suppliers fearing to lose customers.

(iii) Because we believe that the DES is underestimating the amount of parental discontent both present and to come, and because the independent sector in Britain is now so small compared with the maintained, we conclude that a voucher scheme will have to be introduced gradually, but very firmly. We suggest starting, at the beginning of a parliament and therefore now, with tax credits; the amount of the credit being so determined as to encourage just enough parents to go independent that the Exchequer recovers the extra outlay on parents who already are (see Appendix). But, for reasons of principle as well as of political prudence, this immediate tax reform must be accompanied by a firm commitment to extend the freedom of the voucher to every parent of a school age child, or perhaps only to every parent of a secondary school age child, before the next election.

When the time came to fulfil that firm commitment the independent sector would, thanks to those tax credits, have grown or be growing significantly larger. There are, as we ourselves have every reason to know, many people, especially but by no means only among our racial and religious minorities, who are already longing to set up new independent schools; and, given tax credits at once and the promise of vouchers very soon, those and others too would surely begin to take their plunges. There are also large numbers of parents already eager to go independent, but unable to do so while this demands that they pay twice: paying, out of their after-tax incomes, the full price of independent education, as well as paying, through heavy taxation, the full costs of state education.

Here again it is imperative to take account of the dynamics. The DES authors say: "The scope and often the desire for existing schools to expand is limited. Starting a new independent school is a slow, expensive and risky business even without the inhibiting background provided by party political differences." (NM6) All perfectly true, as things now are; which is why a temporary experiment could not constitute a fair test. But, given vouchers or tax credits firmly established, or even a believable commitment to their introduction, then we are - as our American friends say - in an altogether different ball game.

VII AN IRREVERSIBLE SHIFT IN THE BALANCE OF POWER

It will by now be clear both how revolutionary and how populist our proposals are. The object of the exercise precisely is to give power to the parents, the power of the purse. It is to reintroduce the market, with all its promises and its pressures, into what is, and for a very long time has been, aside from a tiny private sector, a monopolistic world. It is, by so doing, decisively to shift the whole balance of power: from the supply side - from those who are directly or indirectly in the business of providing educational services - to the demand side: to the parents whose children are required to consume such services.

Parents with voucher money in their purses could, and, if they were dissatisfied with the services which they were getting from their present suppliers, would, quietly and without fuss take their business to any alternative supplier who they became persuaded would serve them better. No need then to fight their way over any officially constructed hurdles, nor to have any possibly embarrassing personal confrontations, nor to beg the good offices of elected or unelected activists.

It is of course because they see so clearly that any voucher scheme which really is a voucher scheme must effect this sort of shift in the balance of power, and must introduce the pressures of competition where no such pressures were before, that spokespersons for all the various vested interests and power elites of the educational supply side have been quick to declare - to quote the NUT again - "total opposition". Such declarations are, and should be seen as being the same as demands for import controls coming from the trade associations and trades unions in inefficient industries.

Before we press the argument further let us savour one richly revealing statement from a Headmaster who is also and unsurprisingly an officer in the NUT:-

"We see this as a barrier between us and the parent - this sticky little piece of paper in their hands - coming in and under duress - you will do this or else. We make our judgement because we believe it's in the best interests of every Willie and every little Johnny that we've got - and not because someone's going to say 'if you don't do it, we will do that'. It's this sort of philosophy of the marketplace that we object to." (22)

Pause now to ask, and to answer, the question what you would think of suppliers of anything else who were so arrogant and domineering as to object to your wanting to choose what you wished to buy. But here these socialist suppliers want you to accept as a gift - a gift free, of course, only at this point - whatever they may see fit to produce, and to prescribe as satisfactory not to your wants but to your needs; needs themselves to be determined not by you but by them. Having formulated and perhaps expressed your own sharp answer to that question, you may be ready both to recognise the limits and to appreciate the intensity of opposition from producer pressure groups.

It does not however, require any heroic exercise of charity towards teachers to suggest that this may well be one of the issues on which an emphatically socialist union leadership is misrepresenting the ideas and interests of its generally inactive and unindoctrinated rank and file. The Executive of the NUT has, for instance, for several years been totally committed both to universal compulsory ~~comprehensivisation~~ and to the destruction of all independent schools- while its latest conference resounded to howls for the removal of every remaining military obstacle to the expansion of the Soviet Empire. Yet, first in 1974 and again in 1977, two successive NOP polls found - to the spluttering fury of Fred Jarvis, the General Secretary - that exactly the same 72% of all working teachers were opposed to the dissolution of the grammar schools; schools from which so many of them had themselves come, and which they well knew to have offered ladders of opportunity to able boys and girls from disadvantaged homes.

Why, after all, should teachers who are confident in their own competence and conscientiousness either fear or dislike to see the existing maintained schools become directly responsible to the paying parents, in exactly the same way as the independent schools already are; and, it would appear, very happily? Why, furthermore, should members of a profession, which often shows itself touchily sensitive in responding to perceived challenges to its prestige, be opposed to thus in effect retrieving the indisputably professional status of independent experts, selling their skills to voluntarily paying clients?

To understand the intensity of doctrinal socialist opposition to the voucher idea we have to realise how well the socialists perceive the threat posed here to all their dearest dreams of universal and total state monopoly:

state monopoly embracing not only all the means of material production, distribution and exchange; but also the provision of all health, education, and welfare services. The crux - as is clearly recognised by leading spokespersons on both sides of the debate - is that, once a voucher scheme was in place, and so long as free parliamentary elections continued, it would be quite impossible to persuade our people to surrender the fresh power which that scheme had put into their purses.

It is all very well, and all too common, for snooty, supercilious intellectuals to agree comfortably with one another - and safely in private - that working class and other lesser breeds of parents are irresponsible, feckless and incompetent; and hence that all decisions about their children - and indeed all decisions about everyone and everything else - should be made by politicians or teachers or social workers or what have you: the gentlemen from Whitehall, or the party and trades union activists, know best. It is a very different thing to have to explain this on the doorstep to the despised plebs, when you are out canvassing for your local Labour candidate.

Since the 1973 party conference, when Labour opened its doors to all the totalitarian extremists previously excluded, its programme and manifestos have, carrying overtones inconsistent with the spirit of multi-party democracy, begun to speak of "an irreversible shift of wealth and power to the working people and their families." But of course, paradoxical though this may seem to some of our opponents, a genuine power shift to ordinary unpolitical and unofficial people will be achieved by what the media call right-wing policies, rather than by Labour's ever more ferocious and statist socialism. A continuing transfer of the ownership of former council houses to their sitting tenants, combined with the extension of the freedom of the education voucher to all parents, must in truth constitute the greatest possible leaps forward towards the traditionally Conservative ideal of a property-owning democracy. It must also, in the most real sense, be power to the people. This is holus bolus different from the socialist alternative of power for the particular people who shout: 'Power for the people!'

A voucher scheme, as we have just been arguing, would be irreversible in the only way in which, so long as we continue to have parliamentary sovereignty and free elections, any measure can be irreversible. It would, that is to

say, be impossible to secure a majority for reversal. Contrast the excellent but still lamentably limited Assisted Places operation, which would without doubt be liquidated within hours of the entry of any Labour or Alliance minister into the DES. Now worry too whether any independent schools can survive any future Labour victory. It surely becomes obvious that vouchers, by making independent education less socially exclusive than it now is, hold out the only realistic hope for the long term conservation of such independence. Confronting the deplorable and deplored fact that in Britain today only a small, privileged minority enjoys much if any choice of schools, our mean, malign, and passionately Procrustean Labour Party longs to impose repressive measures to prevent anyone at all enjoying any such freedom, ever again. It is, therefore, time and over-time for all users, and for non-using defenders, of privately provided educational services to join the affirmative and generous campaign to maintain the privilege of choice in education by at last extending that previously rare possibility to every parent in the land.

It was - was it not? - Harold Wilson who, while simultaneously maintaining that the grammar school system could be abolished only over his dead body, proclaimed that compulsory ~~comprehensivisation~~ meant "a grammar school education for all". We ourselves could now, by contrast and in complete honesty, present a fully comprehensive voucher scheme as promising "an independent school education for all".

NOTES

- 1 The first quotation is from the account at p.267 of the Pelican Classics edition of The Rights of Man; the rest comes at p.263 of the same.
- 2 P 161 in the 1910 Everyman edition of Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government. Mill here goes on to launch an altogether characteristic, and very vehement, general attack on big government: "If the roads, the railways, the banks, the insurance offices, the great joint stock companies, the universities and the public charities, were all of them branches of the government ... not all the freedom of the press and popular constitution of the legislature would make this or any other country free otherwise than in name" (p 165).

In face of this and many similar statements it is preposterous - you might almost say indecent or obscene - to claim Mill even as a proto-Fabian, much less as a premature Benno-Bolshevik. Compare A.G.N. Flew 'J.S. Mill: Socialist or Libertarian?', in M. Ivans (Ed) Prophets of Freedom and Enterprise (London: Kogan Page, 1975).
- 3 (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1962), pp 86-98.
- 4 It is also and most significantly the case that this tiny minority of independent schools is producing an utterly disproportionate number of the A-levels in real subjects. Of the total number of boys, for instance, entered in 1977 for A-level in French and German 34% and 36%, respectively, came from a private sector taking in only 51% of the total secondary school population. (See The Economist for 27.IX.80.)
- 5 For a development of this thesis see Digby Anderson (Ed) The Pied Pipers of Education (London: Social Affairs Unit, 1981); especially perhaps the first keynote contribution.
- 6 Compare the report of studies by the Institute of Mathematics reprinted in Caroline Cox and John Marks (Eds) The Right to Learn (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1982); and compare their own Sixth Forms in ILEA Comprehensives: A Cruel Confidence Trick? (Harrow, Middx: National Council for Educational Standards, 1981).
- 7 For more such figures, and for their sources, see E.G. West The Economics of Education Tax Credits (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, 1981), Chapter 3. The California figures strikingly confirm Friedman's Law: "Everything that government does costs double"!
- 8 I thank Mrs Marjorie Seldon for supplying these figures and other information from and about this apparently excellent school. The figures for recoupment charges were given by Dr Rhodes Boyson, Under-Secretary of State for Education and Science, in a speech to the National Council for Educational Standards on 25 April 1982.
- 9 See The Economist for 3.VIII.82, p 26.
- 10 The Viscount Eccles, for instance, in a House of Lords debate on 7.X.76: "You cannot trust that great department any longer ... It is a very sad thing for an ex-Minister to say. But you cannot trust that department not to be biased."

- 11 Cf Antony Flew Sociology, Equality and Education (London: Macmillan, 1976), Chapter 2: and compare G Dawson 'Unfitting Teachers to Teach: Sociology in the Training of Teachers', in - again - The Pied Pipers of Education.
- 12 Cf Fred Naylor and John Marks 'The National Union of Teachers - Professional Association or Trades Union or?' in - again - The Right to Learn; and compare the same book passim.
- 13 Cf Antony Flew The Politics of Procrustes: Contradictions of Enforced Equality (London: Temple Smith, 1981).
- 14 C.B. Cox and A.E. Dyson (Eds) Fight for Education: A Black Paper, Black Paper Two: The Crisis in Education, and Black Paper Three: Goodbye Mr Short, all originally published as special issues of the Critical Quarterly. Davis Poynter has, I am told, produced an anthology from these three volumes as The Black Papers on Education 1-3. See also: C.B. Cox and Rhodes Boyson (Eds) Black Paper 1975 (London: Dent, 1975) and Black Paper 1977 (London: Temple Smith, 1977); and Rhodes Boyson (Ed) Education: Threatened Standards (London: Churchill, 1972).
- 15 Report by H.M. Inspectors on Educational Provision by the Inner London Education Authority, DES November 1980, pp 6 and 13.
- 16 C.B. Cox and J. Marks Sixth Forms in ILEA Comprehensives: A Cruel Confidence Trick?, pp 4,9 and 12.
- 17 In the speech referred to in Note 8, above.
- 18 See the NUT pamphlet Examining at 16+ The Case for a Common System (London: NUT, 1978), pp 2 and 6.
- 19 See the account 'William Tyndale' by the dissident Dolly Walker in C.B. Cox and Rhodes Boyson (Eds) Black Paper 1977 (London: Temple Smith, 1977), pp 38-41.
- 20 Juvenalis Saturae (Cambridge, CUP, Revised Edition 1931), p xi. The wording of the protest in the text is fictitious. But in an NUT pamphlet about and against Education Vouchers Edward Heath is quoted as saying: "This is a crackpot scheme by those who think they can sell education with vouchers like canned spuds in a supermarket." It is interesting to note, as an indication of the sympathy of one supply side interest group for another, and of their shared suspicions of the public which they are supposed to serve, that a good third of the quotations in this leaflet are drawn from No, Minister.
- 21 15,000 Hours: Secondary Schools and their Effects on Children (London: Open Books, 1979), p 178. In the decent obscurity of a footnote, I may be permitted to add that, during World War II, my own school shared all the plant of another. Neither institution appeared seriously to suffer in consequence.
- 22 The facts that such not very surprising information has for some time been available to the NUT executive and to many other leading advocates of universal, compulsory comprehensivisation, and that their policy is depriving many bright boys and girls of the educational opportunities which they would have had under the old regime, throw a rather nauseating

light on the NUT's continually repeated claims to cherish a compassionate concern for the "poorer parents and their children" not shared by their abhorred 'right-wing' opponents. These claims are, of course, reiterated in Education Vouchers.

- 23 Quoted by Milton and Rose Friedman in Free to Choose (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980), pp. 173-4.

APPENDIXEDUCATION TAX CREDITS

An education tax credit would be credited or paid to parents or guardians funding the education of a child of school age at an independent private school: if the parents or guardians owed that amount of tax, then the taxpayer would credit them with the payment of the amount of the education tax credit; while, if they did not, then the taxpayer would write them the appropriate cheque. The amount of any such credits would be some fraction of the average cost of educating a child at the appropriate stage in a state-maintained school. (It was proposals of this second sort which, at the time of writing, President Reagan was putting before the US Congress.)

The object of the exercise has here to be one of two things: either, first, to go some way towards remedying the iniquity of requiring those who choose to go independent to pay twice over, once through their taxes and once in private school fees; and/or, second, to encourage many more people to arrange private provision for those for whose education they are responsible. In the present context the second and ulterior purpose would be to increase the number of independent school places without increasing, and perhaps even decreasing, overall public expenditures. That is why the amount of any education tax credit could be only a fraction of the average cost of the appropriate sort of place in a maintained school. The problem in fixing that fraction would be to ensure that so many more parents went private that the consequent savings on providing maintained school places offset the extra expenditures on tax credits.
