

I like the idea of a national curriculum. It has always seemed odd that our free state schools have been controlled by central and local government legislations in so many respects yet have had no clear requirements as to what to teach (except R.E., which is so bizarre as to be dismissable). It must be right that a parent sending a child to a state school should be able to have some assurance that, regardless of accident of home address, a balanced and considered curriculum will be provided.

But there my support for Mr Baker and his like must stop. I can just understand the view that numeracy and literacy have a particular significance. If all other education has failed for a child, then these skills may at least allow him or her to function on a day-to-day, hand-to-mouth basis, enable him or her to read the label on the medicine or tender the correct fare.

Beyond that the 3 R's attitude has been one which most educationalists over the last few decades have tried to break down and broaden, recognising that to educate means more than provide these functional skills. Yet Good-Old-Victorian-Values Mrs Thatcher and Co. will put the clock back, put Maths and English (they mean Arithmetic and Literacy) on a pedestal because (a) they think it will appeal to an electorate whose education gave them little more than that, and (b) they lack the vision and guts to do anything more perceptive or progressive.

To underline their preoccupation with the functional, English and Maths are to be joined by Science as the Big 3, the Core. When I was in the sixth form, I remember being invited by liberal-minded teachers to examine the perceived polarisation of science and art, scientists and artists in our society. Science alone lacks humanity, art alone lacks reality, and so on. Twenty odd years on and our hopes are dashed as Science gets the big O.K. and the arts appear at the end of the list of also-rans.

What would have been so frightening about a national curriculum in which six or eight areas of human expertise or activity were accorded equal status? All subject areas sitting together as equals in a broadviewed core. What is so alarming in the prospect of a curriculum which would help young people develop balanced minds and bodies, inquisitive, supple, adaptable, with historical, social, ethical perspectives, expressive, sensitive, realistic?

Remedial help in numeracy and literacy is fine when appropriate and necessary. Otherwise surely we hope for all-round development and maturity.

And as Mr Baker scribbled the list of 'in' subjects on the back of his envelope, why did he not listen to someone saying, "O.K., science is an area of experience, an area of intelligence. Good thinking, Ken, to prescribe Science rather than the old divisive school subjects (Chem, Phys, Biol) - it says what you are about, ways of thinking, of observing, of reasoning, of predicting. But hang on, what about The Arts, that complementary way of reasoning, observing, expressing, being human? Why are you not giving The Arts the same integrated status? Why separate and weaken them? And why name just art and music? Why omit drama? Why preclude mixed media - O, come on, Ken, don't shudder so, it's not that trendy, the Tory party likes opera." (Maybe it's all a clever plot; knock out drama and combined arts like opera - folks stop going to theatres, no need for whopping subsidies to RSC, ENO, etc - ACGB budget can be cut - Bingo!)

As a partisan for music I must of course be pleased that music is there at all. It will prevent it from becoming an option discardable amid the scramble for available time. It may even lead to the introduction and growth of the subject in some schools. It may lead to resources being directed its way for the massive Inset requirements which will arise as teachers are required seriously to take it on. It may lead to a raising of musical awareness and standards of teaching.

My fear is that the prescription for music which falls from the back of a later envelope will be as unhelpful and muddled as the recent H.M.I. guidelines which were only able impotently to verbalise the patchy status quo and offer no sense of purpose or structure.

The Arts are an area which depends on imagination, experimentation and open-mindedness. Prescription of course content and attainment targets is therefore potentially restrictive. Too rigid a curriculum may stultify the work of just the sort of teachers whose vision and commitment has led, for example, to the revolution of music education over the last twenty years and its radical reappraisal in G.C.S.E. And we all know the potentially deadly pressure of the cramming syndrome on any course.

On the other hand, too vague a syllabus with the sort of bumbling general statements that H.M.I. have currently let dribble effectively allows everyone to continue in much the same way as heretofore with no yardsticks, standards or other well-considered expectations in mind.

A solution - not a fudge - is possible. A clear plan of conceptual development is available, age-related.

criteria can be established for composing and performing skills and aural perception. Within this progressive structure teachers must have the freedom to develop and mould their own syllabuses. Such a structure for music is now being developed by Devon. Hopefully central government's prescription and expectation will enhance rather than hinder this local progress.

I fear, observing the Tory's manic obsession with absolutes, right and wrong, black and white, straight and queer, that the curriculum designers will be expected to impose this sort of arrogance onto the very area of experience which enables human beings to challenge, explore and express ideas and ideals and to feel at ease with shades of grey.

When concern is voiced at the ills within society you can be sure 'education' will come in for blame. It's the teachers' fault; it's ILEA's fault - two targets big enough to be immune from rational, objective proof or disproof. You can allege it's their fault and no-one can prove otherwise. But it is good political fuel so Kenneth Baker leads his pack in a blinkered, self-protecting pre-occupation with conventional, political and educational objectives at the expense of other values and other educational scenarios. He conveniently evades the intangible and subjective facets of experience which are complex and difficult to penetrate, which may defy simple, functional language and may in any case be politically non-profit-making. He will sacrifice the Arts on the tree of objective politics. The impractical and subjective can quietly be ignored and the cost of doing so cannot be quantified and weigh in economic debate.

We need people of perception and creative vision to see beyond economic theory and political convenience. We need philosophers and artists to offer reference points, a base line of human experience, a basis for human thought and action. What is more, do we not each individually need to have some of all these qualities, skills and areas of experience and perception as the basis and root of our own lives?

I was selected at eleven, went to a grammar school, they said a good one, kept up with the express stream, performed well enough eventually to get a good degree. I actually liked school most of the time. But the things I left not knowing, not understanding, not feeling! I emerged tantalisingly and frustratingly incomplete. I envy those with historical perspective, those who feel fluently at home among scientific concepts, those who can appreciate and respond to works of literature. It was at school that a lifetime of habit and prejudice was established, that doors were closed as well as opened.

And now I am part of the same system, dimly conscious of the untapped potential it is stifling. I am inside the system with an urge, maybe even a duty, to be revolutionary - not to undermine, but in a constructive way to inspire change, some little growth, some little move towards a curriculum which is person-centred rather than politically convenient, a curriculum to prepare young minds for life in all its dimensions.

I am saddened that the ethos so far revealed in the national curriculum proposals, the elevation of functional subjects above others, understresses the need to help minds grow in a perceptive and creative way: that is, overlooks the fundamental values of artistic experience, that it appears to ride on a wave of supposed national need (we do so need scientists, you know; insensitive ones) rather than to seek out personal potential, that it is largely inculcative rather than truly educative.

If only one thought the government paid any more than lip service to the arts, if the Minister for the Arts had the clout of that for Defence or Industry or Social Services, instead of being a dispenser of peanuts! What has the Arts Minister said to him at Education (& Science) at the parity it should have with Science or Maths? When will he make it to the front page of the Times Ed. and earn some editorial evaluation?

As possibly the least politically active man in the street I have no party axe to grind, but I have failed to see anything in the rest of Baker's Bill that is likely in any way to improve our education provision. As power is pulled more and more towards his own office and/or towards the self-interested parental groups most certain to be his supporters, the potential corruption of absolute power increasingly becomes alarming and even disgusting.

Our education system is far from perfect, it harbours severely distorted perceptions and is probably the inevitable product of the limited resources invested in it. Nevertheless it is a medium through which and in spite of which we may do our best. It must not be broken up in the interests of a minority. Fringe alternatives may healthily serve to challenge but they cannot themselves effect radical change. Our system must be all-embracing, comprehensive, and it must have a structure which allows itself to be challenged and refined from within; proposals for national curriculum control must not be so tight, insensitive or ideologically motivated as to strangle the opposition.

Our sanity as a nation, and as individuals, depends on it.