



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

26 March 1981

Dear Mrs. Whitehouse,

Thank you for your letter of 31 January. I was glad that you wrote to let me know your views.

Perhaps I might deal first with your point about Mr. Mayhew's remarks during the Second Reading of Mr. Sainsbury's Bill. He was addressing himself very much to the Bill - to which as you know we are well disposed - and to the questions affecting its passage. We thought it only right to make clear that we saw no early prospect of legislation on the matters considered by the Williams Committee because Members of Parliament were entitled to know whether the measure was likely soon to be overtaken by a comprehensive enactment: it would have been unfortunate if the Bill had been rejected at Second Reading on the mistaken grounds that it was likely to be too short-lived to be worth troubling with. Patrick Mayhew was not, therefore, attempting to give a full account of our views on the Williams Committee proposals. It would have been impracticable during the debate on the Bill, which is concerned with only a very small part of the issues raised by the Committee, to have entered into a detailed discussion of the many recommendations.

The passing of Mr. Sainsbury's Bill would not implement proposals made by the Williams Committee: it is concerned only with the display of indecent material and does not extend, as do the Williams Committee proposals, to the whole range of material

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which may be sold legally on such premises. Moreover, the provisions in the Bill about shops displaying warning notices are based not on the report of the Williams Committee but on the report of a Home Office working party on vagrancy and street offences which reported in 1976.

The fact is that the Government has expressed no firm conclusions on the Williams Committee proposals. That is not to say that the Government accepts them. But to discard the proposals without having others to put in their place would not, I think, be an effective way of proceeding. I recognise and share the widespread concern which exists about pornography. But I am also forced to recognise that agreement on changes in the law is much less widespread. The Government's duty is to find solutions which are acceptable to Parliament and the country, and which would be lasting and enforceable. The difficulty of that task does not deter us, but does mean that we should proceed carefully and with full consultation. Progress might be possible on topics causing particular concern, but even these would have their difficulties.

I hope that this helps to show that we are not setting off down the road you thought we were. We are alive to the problems and will do what we can. But progress will not be easy. If you would like to discuss this in more detail with the Home Secretary, I know that he would be very ready to do so.

Yours sincerely
Royall D. White

Mrs. Mary Whitehouse, C.B.E.