



10 DOWNING STREET

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THE PRIME MINISTER

3 March 1980

*Dear Cardinal Hume,*

You wrote to me on 11 February to express again the concern felt by Catholics about the proposed changes in the law on school transport. You have left me in no doubt about the strength of your views.

Under the present arrangements, a small proportion of pupils, most of whom are attending the nearest available maintained school, are completely protected from the rising cost of travel. By contrast, the majority of families including, I imagine, the majority of Catholic families, have no help from the local authority with any travelling expenses which they may incur. This has been the cause of widespread complaint for many years and has led to demands for changes in the law. In these circumstances the Government think it reasonable that the minority of parents who today get free transport should be asked to contribute towards the cost of getting their children to school. I accept that this changes what the Government decided in 1944, but the circumstances now are rather different.

I am more concerned about the possibility that LEAs might discontinue transport arrangements for pupils attending schools that are not the nearest available maintained school. But it would be impossible to freeze the present position because of the variation in the way individual LEAs use their existing powers. We believe that a relaxation of the inflexible requirement that arranged transport must be provided free will enable LEAs to continue with their present arrangements. The action by Oxfordshire

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shows what can happen if the law is not changed; it is less likely to happen if LEAs are permitted to charge.

I can assure you that much thought has gone into this question, and Mark Carlisle is aware of the statements made in 1944. The decision to advocate local discretion rather than central control was not lightly taken. It is therefore encouraging to see that many local education authorities have been modifying their original proposals in response to public opinion. Even Oxfordshire could change; the County Council doubted that the power to charge would be approved by Parliament but, if it is proved wrong, it will have little excuse to go ahead in September 1981 with its proposed policy since it would have plenty of time to work out more equitable arrangements that will preserve an element of subsidy for Catholics whose children attend a distant school.

The purpose of Mark Carlisle's amendments to the Education Bill was to ensure that where authorities do decide to charge they should not be able to discriminate against children attending any particular kind of school, and should not, by charging a distance-related rate, impose an undue burden on those with long distances to travel.

I realise that this approach gives a large degree of discretion over charging to local authorities; but we feel that such a scheme is more likely to provide a lasting solution that preserves the dual system of education than either to leave things as they are at a time of acute financial difficulty, or to introduce legislation that relies on detailed control from the centre.

Yours sincerely  
Raymond White

His Eminence the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster