

Subject

British Council of Churches

The Prime Minister received today a deputation of the British Council of Churches (BCC). This comprised:-

Dr Kenneth Greet, Chairman of the BCC Executive Committee

The Reverend Harry Morton, General Secretary

The Reverend Arthur McArthur, General Secretary of the United Reformed Church

The Reverend Bill Johnston, Church of Scotland

Dame Diana Reader-Harris, Christian Aid

Mr Derek Pattinson, Secretary, Church of England General Synod

Dr Greet briefly outlined the work of the BCC. He said that some felt that BCC statements showed a political left of centre stance, but the BCC hoped that all their statements would be judged in the light of the Christian Gospel and not by whether or not they supported a view of one or other political party.

Dame Diana Reader-Harris spoke about the work of Christian Aid, with particular reference to refugee work in South East Asia, the raising of finance by appeals and Christian Aid's attempts to educate public opinion about the need of help. She mentioned that the BCC had written to the Prime Minister recently to express concern over the delay in re-settlement of refugees. Was there any possibility of a permanent selection committee in Hong Kong? The Prime Minister said that this was something which could be looked at. She mentioned some of the problems of helping the refugees, and the position of other countries in South East Asia which already had large Chinese minorities. Many people in the area felt that the expulsion of the refugees was a deliberate policy to destabilise neighbouring countries in that part of the world.

Mr Pattinson mentioned Southern Africa as an example of BCC concern, deriving from the missionary activity and long historic and cultural connection of all the Churches with the Republic of South Africa. In the 1960s, the Churches' pressure for "constructive engagement" had produced some softening in the policies of the South African Government. The Prime Minister said that she did not agree that had been cause and effect. On the contrary, the process of change in South Africa had been slowed down by indiscriminate hitting out by outside countries at South African policies. Change was coming anyway - it had to do so. The worst thing which outside countries could do would be to withdraw investment. The Prime Minister commented that there seemed to have been no welcome in this country from the Churches when the South African Government had recently announced that there would be changes in the obnoxious marriage law. If the Churches were to commend to their members "disengagement" from South Africa, they would be bound equally to commend disengagement from all Marxist societies. If outsiders reacted in the wrong way to internal South African affairs they would encourage chaos. Similarly, in Namibia, the Prime Minister commented that the new Parliament was doing many good things but still getting no encouragement from the Churches in this country, only criticism.

Mr McArthur introduced a brief discussion of unemployment, arguing that the present situation - unlike that of the period between the Wars - did not admit of a solution because of the impact of technology on work opportunities. The Prime Minister said that technology had created more jobs than it had destroyed, mentioning industries like washing machines, radio, TV and computers. The problem in this country was that we were not producing goods of the quality to meet the demand that existed. The Government did indeed have a strategy of as full employment as possible,

but this was not helped by the view which the Churches so often seemed to express that the individual could cast all his cares upon the State. Areas like the North East certainly had problems, but she commended to the deputation the recent speech by Lord Seiff of Marks and Spencer, pointing out the high income in that area which had promoted strong sales by that company of more expensive goods.

After a brief discussion of Scotland, the Prime Minister said that the Churches seemed to talk of Christianity only in its social manifestations. There were huge problems in places like Glasgow as in Liverpool and Manchester, partly caused by the pouring in of money to those areas in the wrong way, not based on establishing small communities and the spirit of personal responsibility to work and family. Dr Greet said that the BCC were indeed concerned to change attitudes, and were deeply involved in evangelism.

Dr Greet thanked the Prime Minister for receiving the deputation. The Prime Minister said that she had enjoyed the meeting, and looked forward to another discussion some time.

Later, I agreed with Dr Greet the text of a press release by the BCC which mentioned (without further comment) the main subjects raised. I asked Dr Greet to delete a reference to the Prime Minister's views so that the release solely reflected the BCC.

CVP.

16 October 1979