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PRIME MINISTER

Prime Minister:

Sir Keith is an important but sensitive ground: Mr Mount will wish to comment on the handling of his paper. You have, for example, already agreed that the next meeting of the Group should concentrate on a programme of action. H

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FAMILY POLICY GROUP

As mentioned in the summary of proposals for action circulated after the meeting on 10 September, I have prepared a paper on the subject of preparation for parenthood asking ourselves first whether something could be done and secondly, if so, whether the Government should try directly or indirectly to do it or to see that it is done.

22/10

2 You may wish to have this put on the agenda for one of the meetings of the Group.

3 I am sending copies of this to members of the Group.

19

22 October 1982

PREPARATION FOR PARENTHOOD

1 Parents have a duty to provide a consistent framework of care and discipline for their children; but they sometimes fail to fulfil this duty. And the bad upbringing that results from such failure is, if not the only, at least a major cause of poor education and crime. For the broad question posed in this paper I am not distinguishing between having more children than can possibly be managed or unwanted children on the one hand and, on the other, learning how to be good parents to a small number of wanted children; nor am I meticulously involving fathers as well as mothers in the drafting as would be necessary in any policy proposals.

2 Of course there will always be irresponsible parents. But in recent years there seems to have been a sharply rising trend. Earlier generations assumed that education would solve the problems of upbringing. We have had no evidence that this is so. We have to ask ourselves whether potential parents could be helped towards "good-enough" parenting (to use the phrase of Mia Kellmer-Pringle).

3 In approaching this question there are two general points to be made:

i Most people do provide "good-enough" parenting if not better: they equip themselves with the relevant knowledge from their own parents and from books, magazines and advice.

ii Inasmuch as personal responsibility has been eroded by a shift of housing, health, education and welfare provision excessively to the state, we are trying to shift the balance - and this should be part of our answer.

4 It is probably true, however, that a proportion of young people do not equip themselves to be "good-enough" as parents: the young concerned tend to be the least mature from the least good homes. They embark upon parenthood casually. Many of the girls concerned do not have the awareness of the burdens and responsibilities of motherhood. In many cases they have had only a bad example at home. Indeed in some cases they see pregnancy as a means of escape - not realising the strains of bringing up children even in good conditions, let alone in poor. The research that mercifully

shows that "the cycle of deprivation" is not inescapable also shows that a bad upbringing all too often is part of "cycles of disadvantage". Many, in other words, escape from bad parenting and become themselves "good-enough" parents, but many do not.

5 Could anything be done? By hypothesis most of those who provide bad parenting tend to be the least self-disciplined and with short time-horizons. Those girls who are at most risk will tend neither to restrain themselves nor to insist on or use contraceptives nor to have sufficient grip even to consider abortion in sufficient time. Can their attitudes be changed? Can they be brought to realise the real implications of maternity - the burdens as well as the joys? Can they be brought to realise the needs of a child from the start for love and discipline?

- a Can schools do the job? The most vulnerable young people will tend to be the least attentive in class and it will be difficult to find teachers to handle effectively so difficult a subject in relation to so difficult pupils. Moreover, the ambience is far from ideal for the few pupils who are or are about to become parents and a bit distant and meaningless for most of the majority who are not.
- b Can a specialised health and welfare staff do the teaching? I remember from DHSS days that some local authorities/health authorities - Southampton was one - claimed success in lowering the birth rate in areas with large vulnerable populations by effective visiting. Perhaps we could enquire into the current position.
- c What of television? Antony Jay is eager with commercial or charitable money to make television films but he says that they will not be likely to reach or persuade the most vulnerable young people.

6 One possibility - delicate and fraught with risks - would be to try to use, in connection with pregnancy, the approach used in connection with cigarette smoking - that is fear. It was I who for better or worse at DHSS approved the making by the Health Education Committee of four short films to scare young people off smoking. They were widely noticed. Some of the

most vulnerable may have been influenced because the films used hedonistic and short time-horizon arguments. We could therefore explore whether short scare films, suggesting that maternity is marvellous when the parents concerned are ready for it, might be practicable.

7 It is also worth asking how existing parents can most effectively be helped to recognise their responsibilities as parents. Some local education authorities have performed pioneering work in setting up parent support or "outreach" programmes as a means of transforming hostile or negative parental attitudes. Coventry, for example, has appointed suitable teachers as "education visitors" to bring parents of young children into contact with their local schools and to encourage them to help their children, for example by emphasising the importance of their talking and reading to their children. Such "outreach" programmes can serve both to improve parents' relationships with their children and to influence their attitudes to the upbringing of any further children they may have. It would be possible, by speeches, pamphlets etc, to seek to spread examples of good practice.

8 But the overriding question remains. Even if something could be done, should Government try directly or indirectly to do it or to see that it is done? If colleagues decide in favour of trying I would be glad to put to colleagues particularly concerned - the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Social Services as well as the Secretaries of State for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - a paper for consideration.