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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

16 March, 1981

Dear *Donation*,

As you know, the Prime Minister had lunch at the British Computer Society today. After the lunch, there was a presentation by Mr A d'Agapeyeff on "Software Capability as a Major National Asset" and by Mr D Butler on "Education about Computers in Schools". The following points from these presentations, and from the discussion which followed, seem worth recording.

Mr d'Agapeyeff explained the tremendous prospects for the growth of the small and hand-held computer market. It seemed likely that Japan would obtain the bulk of the hardware market; but there were great opportunities for United Kingdom software. However, these opportunities would not be grasped unless the Government were to give a better lead. In Japan and France, strategic planning by Government had played a crucial role in the development of the electronics industry. In Britain, Governments paid lip-service to planning; but in practice it was ineffective. Too much of the planning was done by generalists; technologists played a quite inadequate role. Asked by the Prime Minister to give examples, Mr d'Agapeyeff mentioned the Computer Systems and Electronics Requirements Board, on which - in his view - there were an insufficient number of technical specialists. He also mentioned Viewdata and Prestel, which had failed to take advantage of their tremendous potential because of mistaken marketing decisions. The Prime Minister commented that the Government had done its best to bring in technical specialists to advise on the various schemes in support of computers and electronics generally, and it was spending a good deal of money on such schemes. But there did seem to be a failure all too often to exploit technical developments commercially. However, without more specific examples, she found it difficult fully to accept Mr d'Agapeyeff's analysis. She suggested that he send in a paper setting out his views more fully. Mr d'Agapeyeff replied that he had in fact already submitted a paper to the CPRS.

Mr Butler said that the British Computer Society was already actively involved in assisting computer education in schools. There was scope for developing this further. The Society would like to help the Government by asking their members to act as volunteer school advisers in support of future schools projects. The initiative for these projects would have to be taken by the Department of Education

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and local authorities, but the Society and its members would be ready to co-operate. The Prime Minister said she welcomed this offer of support, and would ensure that Mr Baker and Mr Carlisle followed it up. Mr Blakeley, Chairman of the Society's Schools Committee, suggested that one of the best ways for children to learn about computing would be to use computers and micro-electronic devices where appropriate throughout the curriculum.

Following the lunch, the Prime Minister told me that she would like to give a reception cum seminar for people connected with the computer industry and with computer applications, perhaps on the lines of the reception for innovators and financiers which we had recently. These might include some demonstrations of particular products and applications as well as a discussion. It is unlikely that we would be able to arrange this for some months; but I would be grateful for advice - perhaps this could be prepared in consultation with the IT Committee Secretariat - on how we might proceed.

One of the participants at the lunch, Professor Nisbett of Swansea University, handed over to me some material on a product known at Eurolex (see enclosure). He suggested that, if there ever were to be a product demonstration at 10 Downing Street, this should be a candidate. He also mentioned, for what it is worth, that one thing which was holding back the marketing of Eurolex was the failure of HMSO to put the legislation going through Parliament into computer readable form on an up-to-date basis; they had agreed to do this, but at present they were running several years behind. Is this something that should be followed up? If HMSO cannot do it, could it not be contracted out? Professor Nisbett said that Eurolex would be prepared to pay the full cost of an efficient service.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Peter Shaw (Department of Education and Science), David Wright (Cabinet Office) and Robin Ibbs (CPRS).

TH

Jonathan C Hudson, Esq  
Department of Industry