21 June 1982

MR WHITMORE

Thank you for sending me a copy of Robert Armstrong's note to you.

I think there is some confusion (for which my drafting is probably to blame) about the purpose of the initial note "Renewing the Values of Society" and of the ad hoc meeting of Ministers which the Prime Minister suggested.

The aim is not to set out a detailed programme of work. Such a programme would indeed need to be carefully researched before submission to Departments after agreement at Ministerial level - and would even then, as Sir Robert points out, be fatally vulnerable to buckets of departmental cold water. It would in any case be far beyond the scope of any single Ministerial meeting to examine in detail such a wide-ranging list.

The aim is to describe a general approach to social policy which is analogous to our general approach to economic policy. The Ministerial meeting is intended not to agree proposals, but to give the signal to the relevant Ministers to direct their attention to what can be done in their own fields.

If we accept this general approach, then there are certain policy areas which demand attention: parental control of schools, for instance. The paper suggests ways in which parental control might be made a reality, such as an increase in the number of parent governors. But the question to be asked of the Department of Education in the follow-up stage is not necessarily: "What are you doing about parent governors?" It is: "How do you propose to make genuine parental control a reality? If parent governors are not the answer, how do you propose to tackle this problem?"

The follow-up stage could be handled, in part, by a Cabinet Office unit, as Robert Armstrong suggested to the Prime Minister in his minute of 19 March (and as she then agreed) in relation to Mr Wasserman's original proposal. But it will, to be realistic, also need prodding from the Policy Unit, especially on the more radical and politically charged issues. Gordon Wasserman and I have collaborated on the attached outline of how this twofold follow-up might be arranged.

But what seems to me to be the most important priority is:

(a) to let Ministers have the original paper, only slightly redrafted to make its purpose clearer, accompanied by a covering note which emphasises that the individual schemes are only suggestions for implementing a general policy approach, and that the ad hoc meeting of Ministers - which the Prime Minister thinks is the right way - is intended to discuss that approach and how to implement it; and

(b) to hold the meeting as soon as possible.

FM

FERDINAND MOUNT