



10 DOWNING STREET

PRIME MINISTER

Mr Carlisle told you last week that he was likely to accept the Bexley LEA proposal to split Erith School.

He and Lady Young have spent a lot of time on the problem, and have now concluded that the right course is to reject the LEA proposal to split the school. This is the opposite of what he forecast last week. He knows that either choice would cause problems, but is now satisfied that he has got it right.

He will tell Bexley LEA of this decision next week.

29 February 1980

What bothers me is the complete U-turn around within a week. not

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PRIME MINISTER

When Janet Young and I met you last week I mentioned the very difficult Section 13 proposal I had in front of me from Bexley LEA about Erith School, and I said I would let you know my final decision.

The school is a large one (12 forms of entry) and on two sites. Bexley has a selective system and Erith, alone among Bexley's schools, is so organised that it admits both selective and non-selective pupils. The proposal is to split the school, establishing a grammar school on one site and a secondary modern on the other thereby getting rid of a big school on split sites, and in the view of the Authority, increasing Erith's attractiveness to selective pupils.

My initial reaction was that this was the sort of proposal that we would be very willing to approve - but on closer examination there turns out to be overwhelming arguments against the proposal. I will not trouble you with rehearsing them, save to say that there were two considerations which particularly strongly influenced me. The first is the enormous strength of support for Erith School in the northern part of the borough which supplies most of its pupils. Apart from overwhelming support from parents, the great majority of its teaching staff, and almost all of its governors, for retaining the school as it is, I have had a petition signed by over 12,000 people. Secondly, I am convinced that the educational provision and opportunities available for non-selective pupils, who are as high as 87% in this part of the borough, would be worsened if the school were split. The premises earmarked for use by the proposed secondary modern school are very much sub-standard - half the teaching spaces are in temporary accommodation and it is the view of the Inspectorate that the facilities would be amongst the worst in the country. Moreover, under present arrangements the more able non-selective pupils can transfer at ease to the more academically demanding courses within the school (about 30 per year do so) and to the sixth form in the school (88 in 1979) and this facility, which elsewhere in Bexley is almost non-existent, would disappear if the proposal were approved. Indeed, I have no doubt that it is these educational considerations which account for the strength of support for the school in the locality.

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I realise that my decision to reject the Bexley Authority's proposal will be vociferously opposed by some local Conservatives and may be questioned more widely in the Party. Bexley was among the handful of authorities which held out most strongly against Labour's compulsory reorganisation policy. But my Education Act 1979 has already saved their existing grammar schools and has made it possible for them to retain their selective system. The future of Erith School was not at issue in the Authority's battle with Mrs Williams and I think it is absolutely essential that I should be seen to be deciding section 13 proposals on their individual merits. Indeed, with a number of difficult proposals coming forward, I believe there is positive political gain in showing that to be so.

I shall be communicating my decision to Bexley next week.

*T.A. Shaw*

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MARK CARLISLE

29 February 1980

(Approved by the Secretary  
of State and signed in his  
absence)

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