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PRIME MINISTER

BIASED TEACHING AND POLITICAL INDOCTRINATION IN SCHOOLS  
AND COLLEGES

There is growing concern about the way in which politically controversial issues are handled by teachers in our schools and colleges, and I seek your agreement to the publication of a circular to local education authorities setting out the Government's view of the principles which should underlie teachers' conduct of this aspect of their work.

2. I have made clear in the past, in the House and elsewhere, that what is provided in schools and colleges should always be education and never political indoctrination, and I have stressed my willingness to look into complaints from parents who are worried about what is happening in a particular educational institution. I have received a number of such complaints, but very few have provided evidence of a quality which is capable of being pursued. At the same time the general anxiety on the issue has grown, and much was made of it at our most recent Party Conference.

3. It seems to me that it would now be right to invite the education service as a whole to agree a set of principles for the treatment of politically controversial issues which reflect the values of a free and open society; and I attach a draft circular and covering letter along those lines which I would propose, with your agreement, to send to the teacher and local authority associations and to the voluntary bodies in England for comment. Nicholas Edwards proposes to take similar action in Wales.

4. The publication of a draft circular in this form would commit us to following through to the publication of a substantive circular. I have no doubt that there will be lively discussion about the text of the draft circular,

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but I am confident that there will be much support for it and that few if any at the national level will come out against the propositions set out in it.

5. I have decided that the focus in our present action should be school pupils and young people under the age of majority. While I do not think we can be free from concern about the position in universities and polytechnics, any action in regard to them would have, I judge, to take a different form.

6. On timing, I think that it would now be right to wait until later this term to issue the draft circular; but even if there is continuing industrial action by the teachers at that stage, I would hope to send the draft circular out by Easter, with an accompanying Parliamentary announcement in the form of a written Answer.

7. I should be glad to know whether you are content with these proposals.

8. I am copying this minute to the Lord President, the Home Secretary, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Lord Privy Seal and to the Secretaries of State for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Environment.

KJ.

Department of Education  
and Science

10 January 1986

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Draft letter to national associations

**THE TREATMENT OF POLITICALLY CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN SCHOOLS  
AND COLLEGES**

The Government shares the widely held view that preparation for the responsibilities of citizenship is one of education's principal functions; and that pupils and students under the age of majority therefore need to be introduced, as indeed they are, to those issues of a political character which they will come across in the course of their adult lives.

I am, however, aware of disquiet that certain politically controversial issues may sometimes be tackled in schools and colleges in a manner which amounts to indoctrination. The education service has a long and honourable tradition of upholding the principles of a free and open society. I am sure that all the partners in the service agree that this tradition must be upheld.

In my view the public have a right to be reassured on this score. I therefore propose to issue a circular containing a statement of principles on the lines of the attached drafts. The statement sets out afresh the principles which the partners in the education service have long adopted in discharging their functions. [TO ASSOCIATIONS: I believe therefore that your association would wish to endorse such a statement and to commend it to your members.] [TO CHURCHES: I believe therefore that you would wish to endorse such a statement and to commend it to diocesan boards, to governing bodies and to others who may be concerned.]

I should be glad to know whether you have comments on a circular on these lines and whether you are willing to commend

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the statement in it to your members. As in the case of all circulars issued in draft on my behalf, I would be willing to consider any suggestions you have for amending the text of the draft circular and the draft statement.

I am writing in similar terms to all those on the attached list. [This list will comprise the local authority associations, the school and FE teacher associations, the voluntary bodies who are our education partners, and the Society of Education Officers.]

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**DRAFT CIRCULAR**

The education service in this country has a long and honourable tradition of upholding the principles of a free and open society. The Secretary of State is concerned that this tradition should be upheld in all circumstances and at all times. Consultation has shown that his concern is widely shared.

The statement attached to this Circular has been the subject of consultation with the bodies concerned within the education service; it sets out the principles in accordance with which the Secretary of State intends to continue to exercise his statutory functions. He asks local education authorities and the governing bodies of schools and further education establishments to have regard likewise to the statement when they discharge their own responsibilities and in any guidance which they give to the teaching staff.

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Draft statement of principles

**THE TREATMENT OF POLITICALLY CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES**

1. One of the principal functions of education is to prepare pupils and students for the active discharge of the responsibilities of citizenship. It has long been recognised that this means, among other things, that issues of a politically controversial character will inevitably figure in many parts of the curriculum and can arise spontaneously in any. In treating such issues the education service in this country applies the principles appropriate to a free and open society.

2. Their application has a positive aspect. It is part of the task of schools and colleges to promote the attitudes, knowledge and skills which are necessary for the preservation of our society's fundamental values, notably its commitment to parliamentary democracy, the freedom of the individual within the law, and the equality of all citizens under the law. Among the attitudes to be promoted are a rational approach to evidence and argument, both in forming opinions and in resolving differences, and respect for the right of others to hold their own opinions and to express them within the law; and pupils and students need to be equipped with the intellectual skills needed to defend and promote our society's fundamental values.

3. It follows that, within the limits set out above, schools and colleges should be ready, in the interests of good education, to tackle issues which are politically controversial. In doing this teaching staff should at all times seek to distinguish between fact and opinion, be ready to

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acknowledge personal bias, make clear that on matters of opinion views other than their own may be legitimately held, and encourage pupils and students to form their own conclusions on the basis of evidence and reflection and of discussion with others. How this is best done for pupils and students of varying maturity and understanding is a matter of professional judgment and calls for the exercise of professional responsibility.

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