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CC Martin

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

20 March 1986

Dear Rob

GCSE

The Prime Minister held a meeting today to discuss the new GCSE examination with your Secretary of State, the Lord President, the Secretary of State for Wales and Mr Brian Mawhinney. Professor Griffiths was also present.

The Prime Minister said she was concerned about the introduction of the new GCSE exam later this year. She was aware that many teachers and headmasters believed the timetable for its introduction was unrealistic. These views were held by many in the education world who were strong supporters of the Government, and their anxieties had to be taken seriously. She knew that Baroness Cox, for example, was deeply concerned, as was Mr John McIntosh. She questioned whether the new exam would represent, in any case, an improvement on the existing O'level. In particular, the introduction of course work would put extra influence in the hands of individual teachers and so might prejudice the chances of children whose views did not square with theirs. And O'levels had never been concerned simply with the recall of facts. If the implementation of the new exam were rushed, this could only exaggerate the weaknesses. She understood that many schools had yet to receive draft syllabuses in key subjects. She suggested that the problems might be eased if schools were able to choose whether to start the new courses this year, or to delay their introduction for a year or two, and stick meanwhile with the existing exams. The deferring of the introduction of the GCSE could help ensure that syllabuses were sufficiently rigorous, course work properly assessed, teachers properly trained and text books available. It was vital to avoid giving those in the education world who were opposed to the Government's policies an opportunity to exploit a weakness at such a sensitive time.

Your Secretary of State said that he was convinced the new exam represented a major step forward. With its emphasis on practical skills and problem solving, and away from the the academic bias of the existing system, it would offer fresh opportunities for a very wide range of

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school-children. It would raise, for instance, the level of achievement in subjects like maths, which currently had such a high failure rate. It would promote entrepreneurship. It would replace the existing 20,000 syllabuses for the CSE, run by 19 boards, with 250 syllabuses and 5 examining groups. The course work would have to comply with national criteria and be subject to SEC approval. This would represent stricter controls on teachers than now existed, for instance under the CSE mode 3. He continued to believe that the exam would get off to a good start. As with any new exam, there would be difficulties to begin with. But the opposition would diminish as the new courses were established. To change the timetable now would be to give in to the militant opposition. The extra support for training which he had announced recently would help smooth the way forward.

Your Secretary of State did not believe that it was an option now to allow the existing exams to carry on beyond 1988. The examining bodies had been working on the assumption that they would not.

The Secretary of State for Wales said that he believed the GCSE represented an improvement on the existing exams. He accepted the concerns about the timetable, but he thought on balance that a delay now would cause greater disruption. It would be represented as a great victory for militant teachers.

Mr Mawhinney said that Northern Ireland was committed to following the arrangements introduced in England and Wales. But teacher unions in Northern Ireland were pressing for a delay, because they believed that was necessary to ensure the success of the new exam. The Inspectorate in Northern Ireland had now advised him that they took the same view. He shared the view that it was essential for teachers to be properly geared up to take on the new courses, particularly in-course assessment, and that they were not yet ready.

BF | Summing up the discussion, the Prime Minister said that your Secretary of State and the Secretary of State for Wales should obtain, as a matter of urgency, the views of their Inspectorates. Your Secretary of State would also consult John McIntosh. Once those reports were available, a decision would need to be taken on whether the introduction of the new exam should be delayed.

I am copying this to Joan MacNaughton (Lord President's Office), Colin Williams (Welsh Office), Jim Daniell (Northern Ireland Office) and to Michael Stark (Cabinet Office).

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