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C O N F I D E N T I A L

PRIME MINISTER

An inquiry into bias in education

1. I undertook to let you have my considered views on the possibility of an inquiry into politically biased teaching in the education system for which there was a strong demand in the Lords debate on 5 February. I attach a paper by officials which sets out the main considerations. The choice is, I believe, between a Government inquiry and one set up by the House of Lords. The arguments for and against an inquiry are summarised in paras 15-17 of the paper.

2. In my view the possible outcome of an inquiry is so uncertain as to make it a risky enterprise. I think therefore that if it is to be set up, this should be by the House of Lords itself. We should use our influence to secure that it is chaired by a peer of outstanding eminence - perhaps Lord Home of the Hirsel - and has terms of reference limited to the schools on the lines suggested in paragraph 18 of the paper.

3. I am sending copies of this minute to the Lord President, and the Secretaries of State for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

K.J.

Department of Education and Science

25 March 1986

AN INQUIRY INTO BIAS AND DISTORTION IN EDUCATION

Background

In response to increasing concern about biased and distorted teaching and materials, the Secretary of State has invited the education partners to endorse a statement of principles about the teaching of politically controversial issues in schools and colleges which would then be commended to LEAs, schools and colleges in a Circular. In addition, the Education Bill strengthens the position of governing bodies in relation to their schools and that of parents in relation to governing bodies, in order to bring an informed and concerned lay judgment to bear on the ethos and character of each school.

2. Conservative speakers in the Lords Debate on 5 February, a day after the draft statement of principles was issued, tended to say that this was not enough: an inquiry was now needed also. The general view of those favouring an inquiry may be summed up as being that an impartial body should stand back from the day-to-day exchanges about this matter in order to establish what was going on.

Objectives of an inquiry

3. In principle an inquiry could have some or all of the following objectives:

- (1) To try to establish the facts about the scale and nature of instances of deliberate bias or indoctrination in teaching.
- (2) To establish the extent to which bias is endemic in teaching not as the result of deliberate attempts to indoctrinate, but of sloppy or woolly thinking on the part of teachers.
- (3) To identify measures which ought to be taken by the Government and by others in order to eliminate bias either as in (1) or as in (2) above.

4. As regards the objective in 3(1), the biggest obstacle is the difficulty of establishing hard evidence of malpractices which there is reason to believe do occur. Witnesses are reluctant to come forward for fear of repercussions on the pupils or students. We have found similar difficulties in Widdicombe. Experience also shows that HMI find it very hard during their formal inspections to establish the sort of evidence of bias and distortion which could appear in a published report, although some inspections have revealed the presence of conditions that are conducive to such bias. One difficulty is that much course material contains material which in itself entails a biased presentation, but which is matched by other material, also slanted, which presents another point of view, so that the course as a whole is objective and can be taught in an objective manner. A national inquiry might therefore cause the education service to react defensively; more effort focussed on a limited area might yield better results, for example an inquiry into alleged indoctrination in institutions of selected LEAs. But the evidence, often not very hard, which has been published - for example in a recent article in the Times Educational Supplement - does not purport to cover the whole country. Those areas or institutions selected for an inquiry could claim that there was little hard evidence to justify their selection for investigation, and no ground for excluding others.

5. As for the range of issues to be covered presumably Ministers would wish the inquiry, like the Circular and the statement of principles, to be confined to the politically controversial and in particular not to extend it to religious issues. But a politically contentious issue can relate to social or economic matters, and could even relate to religious questions for example the politics of Northern Ireland or Iran. It follows that however the scope of the inquiry is defined at the outset, the inquiry may move into unintended territory.

6. Moreover the nature of impermissible bias is relevant to both 3(1) and 3 (2). Presumably the inquiry, like the statement of principles and the Circular, does not assume that all value-laden issues which could be politically contentious should be taught without bias. On the contrary, the statement in effect recommends that teachers should, as now, encourage pupils and students to understand and support the fundamental values of our society (as outlined in the statement of principles). This approach should presumably be reflected in the inquiry's terms of reference. But it could not there be spelt out in detail. Indeed the question of what are our society's fundamental values, and the question of how far pupils and students should be encouraged, as opposed to merely given the opportunity, to support these values, are themselves questions which are, or may be, contentious. It seems inevitable that the inquiry's first task would be to form its own view of these questions. The public acceptability of the view would be likely to depend on the confidence which the public had in the wisdom of those conducting the inquiry and in the soundness of their philosophy.

7. This consideration bears particularly on the objective in para 3 (2). There would be ready assent to the proposition that teachers should apply reason and rigour to all they teach and be concerned to examine, for example, their own hidden assumptions. But the issue which can be of concern in this context is the nature of the hidden assumptions, not the fact that they are hidden: a woolly attachment to, say, the rule of law would not give grounds for concern in the same way as, say, a woolly attachment to the notion that unilateral nuclear disarmament in the UK would help to perpetuate world peace.

8. Nor is it likely to be easy to assemble evidence in relation to the objective in para 3(2). Unconscious bias is not easy to establish. Attempts to do so could take the inquiry into the kind of territory in which the Swann Committee began to flounder. The Committee

did not make much sense of the evidence it received about "unconscious racism"; to take another example, a belief that private enterprise is incompatible with preserving the environment could be due as much to woolly utopianism as to unconscious Marxism.

9. The attainment of the objective in para 3(3) plainly depends on how far the objectives in 3(1) and (2) are attained. Although it may be very difficult to reach convincing conclusions about the scale and nature of bias in teaching, an inquiry may nevertheless throw light on what might be done to create conditions in which such teaching is less likely to take place and more likely to be eliminated when it does. But how far the inquiry might thus succeed is bound to remain uncertain.

Bias in teaching whom?

10. Concern about bias in teaching has been expressed mainly in relation to the schools and to institutions of higher education. An obvious distinction can be drawn between children and young people below the age of majority, and those above that age, who may be presumed to need less protection, and certainly protection of a different kind. To extend the inquiry beyond the age of majority introduces a large further complication to a complex and difficult task. However the distinctions between institutions do not correspond neatly to distinctions of age: schools contain young people up to and including the age of 18, and colleges of further education contain students from the age of 16 with no upper age limit. One possibility would be to limit the inquiry to schools.

What sort of inquiry?

11. In principle, the choice lies between an inquiry set up by the Government and a Parliamentary Inquiry. Ministers have decided there is no prospect that an inquiry set up by the House of Commons could tackle the issues otherwise than on party lines. But that need not be true of an inquiry set up by the House of Lords; and although

the Government could not control the composition and scope of a House of Lords inquiry, it might hope to influence its scope eg by the evidence which Ministers gave to the inquiry.

12. To leave it to the House of Lords to set up an inquiry could be seen as less than resolute action on the part of the Government. On the other hand, the action so far taken by the Government - the Circular - is not negligible and the Government would leave open the possibility for further action in the light of the outcome of the Lords inquiry. Indeed, since the House of Lords is asking for an inquiry, why should it not use its powers to hold one?

13. It is also necessary to consider whether an inquiry is likely to come up with findings, either as to fact or action to be taken, which would do credit to whoever set it up. The task, even if its scope is limited, is very difficult. In particular, a failure to establish the facts, or to find hard evidence of bias in teaching, might not settle the matter. The failure might be attributed to the composition of the inquiry; yet it is scarcely conceivable that the Government could appoint an inquiry membership which was other than both knowledgeable and broadly based and which covered a fairly wide range in the spectrum of opinion, under the chairmanship of a respected, independent figure - a judge for example. An uncertain venture of this kind might appropriately be left to the high court of Parliament.

14. A Government inquiry would lack the powers of a parliamentary one in relation to, for example, the summoning of witnesses; and it would also be more expensive in scarce departmental manpower.

The case for an inquiry

15. The main arguments for an inquiry are:

- (1) An inquiry is the natural response to public concern over a matter like bias in teaching which is difficult and potentially extensive. The necessary attention cannot be given to it in the day-to-day business of Government.
- (2) The issue is sufficiently contentious not to be left solely to the Government, which might be thought to be parti-pris.
- (3) The Government is under pressure to act against bias in teaching. But it is far from clear what action would be for the best. An inquiry offers the best prospect of good advice.
- (4) The Government may find it easier to resist unwise and unworkable amendments to the Education Bill if there is an early inquiry.

16. The arguments against an inquiry are:

- (1) Given the difficulties its outcome is uncertain and may rebound on whoever sets it up.
- (2) It is likely to be criticised by some as a witch-hunt.
- (3) It will be taken by many as yet another vote of no confidence in the education service.

17. The force of the arguments against an inquiry would be considerably diminished if it took the form of a Lords inquiry, under an exceptionally respected chairman; and if its scope were restricted so as to improve the prospect that its task might be manageable.

Terms of reference

18. As noted above, if the inquiry were set up by the Lords, they would determine the terms of reference. Subject

to that caveat, and to illustrate the possible terms of reference of an inquiry which was relatively narrow in scope, the following draft terms are offered for Ministerial consideration.

"To inquire into the nature and extent of deliberate bias and distortion in the teaching of politically contentious matters, and in the materials made available, in schools, having regard to the statement of principles prepared by the Secretary of State for Education and Science [which has now been endorsed by the education service] and to recommend any further action which may be desirable on the part of those concerned."

Timing

19. The amendments likely to be moved during the Lords Committee Stage of the Education Bill on 15 April may force the Government into an early statement of its attitude towards an inquiry. If the Government decided in favour of an inquiry and set it up itself, it could hardly do the latter until after the issue of the Circular with the definitive statement of principles. The consultations on the draft circular and statement can be completed soon after Easter, provided the education partners can be induced to give a quick response on a matter of great importance to them.

