Prime Minister

Brian Griffiths would like to raise this in his meeting with you. N 3/4

PRIME MINISTER

POLITICAL BIAS IN EDUCATION

Attached is a rather odd minute from Sir Keith Joseph about whether to have an inquiry on political bias. The minute canvasses two kinds of inquiry: a Government inquiry and one by a House of Lords Committee. It comes down against a Government inquiry on the grounds that it will be assumed to have prejudged the issue and argues in favour of one by the House of Lords on the grounds of its independence. The minute suggests that the Government could secure an eminent Chairman such as Lord Home to ensure that the report was on the right tracks.

Lord Whitelaw's minute which is attached at Flag A is, in my view, rightly sceptical about this proposal. Select Committees of either House require the consent of both sides before they can be established. There is small chance of the Labour Party (or indeed the Alliance Parties) agreeing to an inquiry into left wing bias in schools. Nor can the Government dictate the choice of members or Chairmen even if there were to be such an inquiry. Quite frankly, it is a non-starter. Indeed, there must be a suspicion that the evident lukewarmness of the DES towards the idea of having an inquiry at all leads them to suggest such a daft notion.

This is not an issue on which there is any possibility of bipartisanship. The Government has to decide whether to grasp the nettle of a Government inquiry or to let the matter rest with the DES circular.

It is not impossible to have such an inquiry: the Widdicombe Committee showed that it was possible to produce a workable report in matters of this kind. The only question is: is it worthwhile at this stage?

i) Do you wish to further press the idea of an inquiry? If so, we will need to consult the Chancellor of the Duchy;

or

ii) Do you wish to let the circular have time to work, if it is going to, with the possibility of an inquiry to be held out if there continues to be evidence of bias?

Looking to the future, any recommendations resulting from the inquiry could form part of a wider educational package to be presented in the next Election manifesto. Alternatively, an inquiry could itself form part of the package.

Timothy Flesher
1 April 1986

SECRET AND CMO

CC/BG B/UP 1

Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster

PRIME MINISTER

EDUCATION

In folder attached

Keith Joseph has sent me a copy of his minute "How to get better schools". I have, for my own part, been considering the inadequacies of the existing relationship between Central Government and Local Education Authorities.

In view of Keith's initiative in sending you his minute, and our proposed meeting, I think that I should set out before that meeting one further option to be considered, and some of my initial views on the range of radical options for change in the structure of education available to us.

The teachers' dispute has shown that the present structure is ill suited to the contemporary scene in which many LEA's are in the hands of, or heavily influenced by, members who regard education as secondary to partisan politics and in which the leadership of some teaching unions take a not dissimilar line.

I believe we should reject the idea of direct central control of schools. We don't have the machinery for it. It would infuriate our supporters who run good LEA's; and it runs counter to the whole thrust of our policies both to increase local accountability and responsibility, and to allow the interests of the consumer to work, as they do in the market-place. Nor am I attracted by such options as treating the education service as a "nationalised industry", or converting it into a national service, managed locally, on the lines of the health service.

Single-function locally-elected bodies escape the accusation of placing central direction before local responsibility. And it may serve to reduce the extent to which the control of education locally is put into the hands of those with wider political priorities which causes them to ignore the expressed wishes of local people on the particular character of education service they wish to see provided. But it would be deeply resented, nonetheless, by local government, who would see their responsibilities emasculated; and, most important, it would only leave us where we are: doomed to pay, but unable properly to influence the manner of spending.

This leads me back to basics. How do we re-create the effect of a customer and a supplier of a service? A voucher scheme is not sufficient. In too many cases, the choice so created would be imaginary not real. There would remain for most a monopoly supplier of education services. I believe that we should explore the possibility of instituting a customer-contractor relationship by which Government would pay LEAs, by a formula on a per capita basis, to educate children within specified curricula and to specified standards.

A statutory duty would be required, to be laid upon LEAs, that they should propose a contract to Government which would provide places in the maintained sector for all those seeking it, subject to expenditure at the level set by Government, and consistent with the performance criteria set by Government. There will of course be considerable local discretion in how this schooling is arranged, or the standard of schooling may be raised above the national contractually agreed standard by additional local expenditure.

No

By this means, the effective power will have been switched from the supplier to the purchaser. I see this model as being effective in improving public sector education, and to offer the opportunity to move at a later date towards education credits or some other market-based scheme. The contract would also underpin the capital expenditure programme which would allow Government to approve capital spending plans (financed as now), which would be consistent with providing school premises sufficient to meet the authorities' existing and prospective contractual commitments.

It is in the enforcement of the contract that the key to solving our present difficulties would lie. A contract between an LEA and Government may run well and smoothly. Equally, it might emerge that an LEA was not producing the goods. In that case, the customer (ie Government) would propose changes in the arrangements, eg that a school with a bad record would be closed, or its head dismissed. Government would, of course, pay close attention to the views of parents in arriving at these determinations under the contract. In the event that the LEA refused to cooperate, then Government could decline to pay for pupils to attend that school.

Similarly, in circumstances such as we have experienced recently, if, as in Scotland, 300,000 pupil days were lost, then so would be the appropriate percentage of contract payments.

Thus we would have an effective mechanism which could be used with discretion and provision to avoid hitting our friends whilst aiming blows at the unGodly!

My proposal seems to me to be rather less radical than Keith's option 3, automomous schools, and rather more effective than his proposed change to specific education grants. It would not rule out Government maintained schools, nor the assisted places scheme, nor the support of private sector schools, existing or new. In the light of some of our recent difficulties with backbenchers, the media and the Party, perhaps a Green Paper setting out Keith's four options, plus mine, would offer the best chance of a firm commitment by a White Paper and possibly publication of a Bill before the general election.

I am sending a copy of this minute to Willie Whitelaw, Nigel Lawson and Keith Joseph.

NT

NORMAN TEBBIT

31st March 1986

EDUCATION Policy PT6

PRIME MINISTER

AN INQUIRY INTO BIAS IN EDUCATION

I have seen Keith Joseph's minute of 25 March on a possible inquiry into politically biased teaching in the education system. I accept that proposal has considerable merit.

However I do not think that this subject matter is appropriate for investigation by a House of Lords Select Committee. In the House of Lords the consent of all the political parties is usual before setting up a Select Committee and this is unlikely to be obtained in this instance. In my view the parties are unlikely even to agree that there is a problem that requires investigation. There is also the question of membership. We shall have no control at all over the nominees of the other parties and as a result it would be very difficult to predict what the Committee's findings might be. Finally even if such a Committee were set up the political divisions within it are likely to be such that unanimity would be highly unlikely.

For these reasons I very much hope, if Keith Joseph's proposal for an inquiry is to be pursued, that it will not be considered on the basis of a House of Lords Select Committee.

I am sending copies of this minute to Keith Joseph; to the Secretaries of State for Wales, for Scotland and for Northern Ireland; and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

Privy Council Office
27 March 1986