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7 April 1986

Dear Prime Minister,

It seems to me most encouraging that a new debate about education is getting under way within the Party. It reflects growing concern about schools, particularly among our supporters. Many of the heads of the Home Departments in your Government find the signposts of our own policies pointing in the direction of educational reform. We all have to be educationists now, because the policies which we wish to promote cannot thrive without changes in education. This must be true of Kenneth Baker, David Young and Paul Channon. It is certainly true of myself because of the Home Office interest in law and order and race relations. The problem of educational standards is central to tackling the problems of the blighted inner cities. So I very much hope that out of this debate will come a scheme for a new Tory Education Bill which will emerge in outline this year and form a central plank of our next manifesto.

I drafted what follows before seeing recent press reports which cover some of the same ground, and my thoughts are independent of whatever thinking lay behind these reports.

Such a scheme will need to go very wide and encourage a revival of the variety of educational provision which was once one of the strengths of our school system. It will have to deal with increasing the scope for parental contribution; with the need to take education once again out of the block grant; with the perils of indoctrination; with the structure of the teaching profession; with equipping young people better for the world of work and to play a responsible part in society; and with the need for increased resources. These are not matters directly for me as Home Secretary. But there are some points which arise out of our experiences in the Home Office and which perhaps you will allow me to put now in this informal way.

The peak age for offending for males is now 15 and for females 14. In our inner cities there are some excellent schools, but it is hard to avoid the impression that the system as a whole is failing those who need it most. Indeed

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where the problems of the children are the greatest the performance of schools is too often at its weakest. In these places truancy runs at 20% and a lot higher among older pupils. Pupils derive their information and impressions not from teachers but from their peers and from television. School is often irrelevant except as a social meeting place for the exchange of experiences among peers. Yet the potential importance of schools is enormous. It is a part of the structure of the lives of these young people even though it may contribute little to their well-being. It has the potential to offer stability to people whose lives often lack a sure foundation.

As I wrote to you in October, the chance of peace in our inner cities depends in the long run on our ability to prevent the pool of young unemployables from being constantly replenished from below. That chance depends substantially on what we do about schools.

In the inner cities I doubt if there is any prospect of succeeding in this by giving new power, responsibilities or choice to parents, white, black or Asian. To take an extreme example, the young black mother coping alone with five children would simply be unable to understand or cope with fresh responsibilities. If she were minded to intervene she would most likely be intimidated by a teacher whose mastery of educational jargon would be sufficient to reduce her - and many other parents - into dumb acceptance. Furthermore, I believe that there is every likelihood in the inner cities that supposedly independent parental representatives on governing bodies will often effectively be selected and manipulated by teachers, many of them acting for political purposes. What this harrassed single mother wants for her children, and what they need to keep them within the boundaries of our society, is a good school provided by the community. But I strongly believe that we cannot succeed in the areas I am concerned about by propping up the existing LEA system by fresh resources or renewed exhortation. The decay and politicisation of local government in some of them has gone too far.

In the light of this analysis, I see part of the way forward as being along the lines of:

- a) the encouragement of voluntary aided provision by churches, including the black churches, or by responsible community groups. Inspection to enforce standards rigorously is essential, but provided this is forthcoming we should face squarely the consequences of encouraging such variety. The problems of being thought to be encouraging separatism are considerable, as are aspects of the education which some fundamentalist Moslems would wish to promote. But there is perhaps more to be said for having a few

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schools run by Asians teaching some of the values of the sub-Continent as well as the English language than perpetuating the present incoherence of schools in areas like Tower Hamlets.

- b) the establishment in some of the inner cities of direct State schools, funded, staffed and run by Government (either the DES or a special Board) with their own staff structures, curriculum and salary scales. LEAs in some of these areas would have to be relieved of their buildings and responsibilities, perhaps at first on a pilot basis.

(a) and (b) are not alternative but complementary. (b) is heretical of course, but politically acceptable in my view as part of a wider package covering the points I sketched at the start of this letter.

Of course we can only think in this way because of the success of Keith Joseph in transforming the debate. The fact that there is now so much emphasis on the objective of raising standards is very much a result of the notable reforms which he instigated. Much can still be achieved, particularly once the teachers' dispute has been brought to a close, through leadership and through the reforms which he is pursuing in teacher training and the profession. Nevertheless, particularly in the areas of highest stress I think that this will not be enough and we need to examine more radical options.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Keith Joseph.

Yours,
Douglas Hurd

DOUGLAS HURD

