

PRIME MINISTER

24 April 1986

EDUCATION BILL: AMENDMENTS RE. POLITICAL BIAS

The groundswell of opinion in the House of Lords over political bias has at last forced the DES to accept amendments to the Education Bill from Caroline Cox and others (Charteris, Orr-Ewing, Harris of Greenwich, Renton, Chalfont and Annan). Caroline Cox claims it has wide all-Party support.

Although the DES may try to mobilise legal opinion against their amendments on the question of judiciability, it appears that no less an authority than Lord Denning is prepared to defend the amendments on this score.

The Secretary of State in his letter to the Solicitor-General of 22 April lists five possible options, though the setting up of a complaints body is of a different standing than the first four suggestions; and, indeed, might be used in the practical implementation of any of them. His preference for Option B - "a positive duty on LEAs to promote a responsible approach to political issues" - while good in being positive not negative, depends crucially on "responsible" being judiciable, which must be open to question.

The Lords' draft reworded Amendments

The following are the existing likely amendments.

Primary Schools

"It shall be the duty of every local education authority to forbid the pursuit of partisan political activities in their primary schools as part of school life, whether in their schools or elsewhere."

Political impartiality

"It shall be the duty of every local education authority to ensure that in the teaching of any subject in any of their schools the presentation of political views shall be impartial and objective."

Police in schools

"The articles of government for every school shall provide that courses on crime prevention and road safety are provided by any policeman or policewoman appointed for the purpose by a chief officer of police."

Published syllabus

"It shall be the duty of the governing body of every school to ensure that up-to-date written statements of the school's syllabuses are available to parents on demand."

Freedom of speech

"It shall be the duty of any university, polytechnic or college of further or higher education to use available resources, including if necessary requesting the help of the police, to prevent serious interference with freedom of speech within the law on their premises."

Recommendation

It is virtually certain that the present Bill will be amended. It is important that the amendments have bite. Your support in the coming week could be crucial to their success. I would suggest you invite Caroline Cox in for ten minutes or so next week and discuss the matter with her.

BG.

BRIAN GRIFFITHS