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PRIME MINISTER

EDUCATION - CHANGING PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

I find that large parts of the education system are demoralised. The industrial action has taken its toll. Certainly teachers - even the many who have customarily supported us - are demoralised. My task is to put pride back into the job of teaching. Later in the year we will have to deal with teachers' pay and I don't want to raise this now.

Parents too are pretty demoralised as a result of the teachers' dispute and they simply want to see better schools for their children. Easier said than done. The children too have experienced a hard time seeing people, whom they have looked up to, letting them down and walking out on them.

The polytechnics are talking of enrolling fewer students this year when industry is stepping up its demands for qualified recruits. The UGC are telling me that we shall have to close universities despite the clear interest of our supporters in sending their children to university and at a time when the Government is criticised for failing to increase the output of graduates in line with what our competitors are doing overseas.

I fear that the public perception of our education policy is poor. I have made a list of good things and the bad things and as you would expect the good things far exceed the bad but alas that is not the public perception. Almost every headline refers to a crisis in education. I'm going to have my time cut out turning this perception around. We do not have very much time.

This is very unfair to my predecessor who set in hand major reforms on which I will build - curriculum reform, TVEI, teacher appraisal and training, GCSE, the emphasis on the quality of teaching, parent governors and strengthening the Headteacher. He was also right to make the universities face up to the reality of their costs. On all these matters I will be bringing forward proposals as the year progresses.

However as I made clear at the meeting with you when you appointed me action has to be taken now so that its effects can be seen and appreciated this winter and next spring. This is also the view that has been put to you by the Executive of the 1922 Committee. The outcome of the PESC deliberations for next year will not be known till November and will not be implemented until next April. Quite frankly that is simply too late to wait to turn round the public perception and win support for the success of our policies. I mentioned to you the 2 areas where I felt, and I am now convinced, that action is necessary and that is in books and buildings.

BOOKS

1. I have come to the conclusion that it is essential to ensure that the GCSE is successfully launched this year. There is widespread support in the educational world that it is an enormous improvement on the existing exams; it is a gateway to a common core curriculum and it is one of Keith's major achievements. It will force teachers to give proper emphasis to practical skills - not just in design and technology but in mathematics, sciences and languages; it will challenge the less able instead of discouraging them as the present examinations undoubtedly do and reinforces for all children what David Young is seeking to do. Some teachers want it postponed so that any extra work they may be involved in becomes part of the ACAS assisted negotiations.

Teacher co-operation is vital to its success and this will not be forthcoming without more cash for books and equipment. We have made £20 million available in the next two financial years - the headteachers have asked for £100 million. In my judgement an increase of £20 million for secondary schools this September will win teacher and parent support. David Young has kindly agreed to make a transfer of £5 million from his budget but this alone will not be enough. I will have to announce an increase within the next 2 weeks.

2. The books and equipment available in many primary schools are also extremely limited or old. There are some who claim they have not had new books for several years. When we announce the increase for secondary schools there would be a huge outcry if nothing was done for the primary schools. Indeed we would make the public perception worse if we did one without the other. I therefore propose an increase of £20 million for primaries so that new books and equipment can be bought for the Autumn term.
3. The equipment in colleges of further education and polytechnics is also getting increasingly out-dated and in many cases is appallingly inadequate. I am proposing that we should also announce an increase at the same time of £10 million.

Summarising these 3 points under books and equipment, I therefore propose that we should announce an increase in spending on these items in the current financial year of £50 million. It would be my intention to target this money quite precisely by grants so that it doesn't get lost in the mish-mash of local government expenditure.

How does SJS propose to ensure that the money goes to books.

If possible to spend it - in the current financial year.

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BUILDINGS

The second area where the public can see that something needs to be done is in the maintenance of school buildings. Estimates have been made that a sum of £3 billion is needed. The spend this year is likely to be about £500 million. This cannot increase quickly and I estimate that the most that could be spent this year if an announcement is made this Summer would be £30 million. I would propose to make at least £10 million of this available to the churches for voluntary aided schools. I therefore propose that we should announce an increase in spending in building maintenance and capital in the current year of £30 million.

Both of these would show that we recognise that something has to be done. It would in my judgement redound very well to the credit of the Government that it is willing to recognise that more should be spent sensibly in these areas and spent now. If we postpone either of these it will be too late to get any significant electoral benefit from them.

I would intend to present this in a very positive way for the Government - involving all MPs and pointing out that this means every secondary school gets about £4000 and each primary about £1000 and the colleges of further and higher education could have £2000, possibly for new lathes and new electronic equipment. And on the capital side we would aim to take out of our colleagues' post-bags about 80-100 of the most contentious cases involving dilapidated school buildings. This would mean that the new school year this autumn would start with more confidence, and hope.

Can come from industry.

Before I put these proposals to the Chief Secretary, since it would involve an increase of some £75 million in expenditure which I do not have in my budgets, I would be grateful if I could see you personally about them this week. The second reading of the Education Bill will take place next week, probably on Monday, and I am bound to be pressed very hard on these specific points as well as on the general issues of morale and the value that the Government places upon education.

K. S.

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