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10 DOWNING STREET

*From the Principal Private Secretary*

17 March 1986

*Dear John,*

May I bother you with a small but troublesome piece of legal business which has come our way.

On 9 May last year when the Prime Minister was due to answer Oral Questions in the House, Mr. Richard Holt, MP, who was at No. 2 on the Order Paper, telephoned the Political Office here to give the Prime Minister notice of the Supplementary Question which he wished to ask. He said that he wished to refer to reports of industrial action at a school for such children near his constituency which led to handicapped children being abandoned by their teachers at lunchtime. In order to ensure that the Prime Minister's response to Mr. Holt was accurate, the Parliamentary Questions Clerk in No.10 contacted the Department of Education and Science and asked them to make enquiries. Given the shortage of time (we would have had about an hour's notice) the attached internal note was, we assume, dictated over the telephone by a Department of Education and Science official. The exchange duly took place in the House of Commons that afternoon and I enclose a copy of the relevant section of the official report.

Subsequently it seems there was some dispute about the accuracy of the exchange between Mr. Holt and the Prime Minister which culminated in an attack on Mr. Holt being published in "The Teacher" magazine in July. That report claimed that Mr. Holt had been "responsible for feeding false information" to the Prime Minister and that "the Prime Minister was made to look extremely foolish" as a result.

Mr. Holt has now taken legal action against those involved in the publication of those remarks. In his statement to the Court he is proposing to say that the information which was given to the House of Commons was "independently verified by the Prime Minister's office." He further says "that the Prime Minister's office made their own enquiries as to the position at Endeavour School" and "that the Prime Minister's office themselves spoke to the Chief Education Officer and themselves checked the facts relevant to the question I proposed to ask so that the Prime Minister would be in a position to answer it in the House". Mr. Holt's solicitors have written to him to ask that he should check with this office that the assertions he makes are valid. In doing so, Mr. Holt's solicitors pointed out that a statement from Downing Street of the kind necessary

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to verify Mr. Holt's assertions might cause the defence in the case to issue subpoenas against members of No.10 staff. Mr. Holt has now contacted Michael Alison, MP, the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary, informally to seek a statement from here of the kind which would verify his assertions to the Court.

Despite the informality of the approach from Mr. Holt, our judgement is that this is a matter on which the response should come formally from Treasury Solicitors. If you agree, we shall inform Mr. Holt, through Michael Alison, that his solicitors, who are Penningtons of 99, Aldwych, should make a direct approach to you for the information which they seek. I should be happy to discuss this if you need any further background; alternatively Tim Flesher is the Private Secretary who was principally involved and Oral Questions are his territory within No.10.

*I altered the documents  
which the MP has  
sent us via the  
PNS, PPS, Michael Alison.*

*Yours sincerely  
Nigel Wicks.*

(N L WICKS)

J. B. Bailey, Esq., C.B.,  
Office of the Treasury Solicitor.

and there will be a debate on the matter this afternoon. If I receive any requests for a meeting I will of course give them full consideration.

**Rev. Martin Smyth:** I welcome the Minister's response but will he recognise that the matter concerns not only the rest of the United Kingdom but has specific implications for job opportunities in Northern Ireland? Will he use his influence with his right hon. Friend the Minister to have such an agreement speedily implemented, for the good of all the textile industry?

**Dr. Boyson:** I realise, as does the hon. Gentleman, that the percentage of people employed in the textile and clothing industries in Northern Ireland is three times greater than in the rest of Britain and that is an important matter. If the hon. Gentleman is staying longer this afternoon, I suggest that he tries to catch your eye, Mr. Speaker, in the debate on the multi-fibre arrangement.

**Mr. Bell:** Does not the Minister realise that that answer is not acceptable to those who work in the textile industry in Northern Ireland? Does he not recognise that it would be socially intolerable to increase the existing pressures on employment in Northern Ireland through non-renewal of the multi-fibre arrangement? Will he give the House an assurance that he is prepared to fight his corner with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry?

**Dr. Boyson:** Obviously, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I put forward the views of Northern Ireland. But as the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) knows, the decision is made by this Parliament and not just by Northern Ireland. Indeed, those hon. Members who are integrationists want the decision to be made by this Parliament. Consequently, this afternoon's debate will be the decisive factor.

## PRIME MINISTER

### Engagements

**Q1. Mr. Winnick** asked the Prime Minister if she will list her official engagements for Thursday 9 May.

**The Prime Minister (Mrs. Margaret Thatcher):** This morning I presided at a meeting of the Cabinet and had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House I shall be having further meetings later today.

**Mr. Winnick:** If it is true that today the Cabinet decided to abolish or phase out the state earnings-related pension scheme, how can the Prime Minister justify 11 million people being swindled out of their right to be able to spend their retirement in comfort and dignity? How many of those 11 million people who will be adversely affected by the Cabinet's decision believed the pledges that were given at the time by her and her colleagues to the effect that the scheme would not be touched?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman must contain himself in patience. Today the Cabinet completed its consideration of the social security review. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Services will now finalise the Green Paper, which is to be published following the Cabinet's decision. He hopes to be able to publish it and accompany it by a statement to the House soon after the Whitsun recess.

**Mr. Holt** asked the Prime Minister if she will list her official engagements for Thursday 9 May.

**The Prime Minister:** I refer my hon. Friend to the reply that I gave some moments ago.

**Mr. Holt:** During her busy day would my right hon. Friend care to reflect on the fact that at the Endeavour school in Middlesbrough handicapped children who are confined to wheelchairs are being abandoned by their teachers at lunch-time, in connection with the dispute, and that so-called professionals are causing great distress to both parents and children?

**The Prime Minister:** I believe that the information that my hon. Friend has given about the school in his constituency is correct. I understand that for a time the head teacher was trying to cope on his own but was unable to do so. I am amazed that the teachers should have taken this action, and my sympathy lies with the children, many of whom are in wheelchairs, and with their parents.

**Mr. Steel:** Is the Prime Minister aware that a very warm welcome awaits her on her visit to Scotland tomorrow? As we have just passed the 10th anniversary of her pledge to abolish the rating system, will she recognise that no announcement of temporary relief—however welcome—would be a substitute for redeeming that pledge?

**The Prime Minister:** As the right hon. Gentleman is aware, we have made some provision for temporary relief on domestic rates in Scotland—as was announced some time ago—amounting to about £90 million. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State hopes to be able to make a further announcement to the House next week, which will help with commercial rates. We are also studying the longer-term reform of rates, and we hope to be in a position to make an announcement about that when the studies have been completed.

**Mr. Michael Morris:** Is my right hon. Friend aware that one of the reasons stated for the loss of the Bosphorus bridge contract was the time taken to put together an aid and trade project? Is she further aware that although she returned from her highly successful visit to Sri Lanka three and a half weeks ago, we still await the result of the aid and trade negotiations on the Samanala-Wela dam?

**The Prime Minister:** When I was in Sri Lanka I announced a further aid package of £20 million for Sri Lanka, following the £115 million aid package that was given to enable the building and completion of the Victoria dam. My hon. Friend asked about the Bosphorus bridge. The contract went the other way because the rival consortium gave heavy aid, not only for the bridge but for the road contract. We are still in contact with the Turkish Government and hope that we can rescue something from that contract.

**Mr. Kinnock:** The Prime Minister had what she quaintly called her rates summit at Chequers six weeks ago. Was it there that the decision was made to rush through a panic Bill for Scottish commercial rates relief, or did the decision come later, without the benefit of a seminar, but with the benefit of the knowledge that the right hon. Lady was going to a Scottish Tory party conference that is on the warpath?

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PROPOSED QUESTION FROM RICHARD HOLT - QUESTION 2

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U "Would my RHF care to comment without wishing to take a positive view on the professional attitude of teachers at the Endeavour School, Middlesborough, which is a school for physically handicapped children, who despite the reached pact between Cleveland County Council and school teachers' Union representatives are abandoning their wheelchair bound children at lunchtimes to the great distress of the children and their parents?"

Line to Take

I understand that the pact referred to by my hon Friend is one reached between the National Union of Teachers and Cleveland Local Education Authority. In return for the Authority's support for the teachers' pay claim, the NUT have exempted the Authority from strike action. However, I understand that the exemption does not extend to withdrawal of midday supervision, nor does it cover action by other unions. My sympathy goes to those children and their parents who are affected in this way.

Background Note

- i) Mr Holt has spoken to the LEA this morning after a complaint from a parent. This is not a new situation.
- ii) Endeavour School is a school for the physically handicapped, 30 - 40% of whom are wheelchair bound. The teaching staff are refusing to undertake midday supervision and the Head Teacher has attempted to cope on his own. However, in view of the nature of the children's disabilities he can no longer cope. He has written to parents and asked them to make arrangements for their children over the lunch period.

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