

MR. WICKS

RICHARD HOLT, M.P.

Michael Alison has passed to me the attached bunch of papers on which I should like your advice. The story is this. On 9 May 1985, Mr. Holt, who is Conservative Member for Langbaugh (near Middlesbrough) was No. 2 on the Order Paper. He telephoned the Political Office and informed them that he wanted to ask a question about industrial action at a school in his constituency for the handicapped which meant that parents were having to take children home at lunchtime. In view of the fact that only a few weeks before we had been given bad information by the DES about industrial action at the school for the handicapped (which had led to the Prime Minister apologising to the staff), we arranged for the position to be checked with DES. You will see from the attached briefing note the outcome.

The exchange duly took place on the Floor of the House with the Prime Minister basing her reply on the information we had received from DES. The exchange infuriated local teachers who claimed that it was not a valid account of what was taking place. Accordingly, they published in the July edition of "The Teacher" some rather abusive material about Mr. Holt, including the allegation that he had fed the Prime Minister false information. Mr. Holt took umbrage and sued them for libel. In his statement to be given to the court, Mr. Holt has prayed in aid of the accuracy of the exchange the fact that the words used in the House were "independently verified by the Prime Minister's Office prior to the reply being given in the House of Commons". He goes on "The Prime Minister's Office made their own enquiries as to the position at the Endeavour School on which the Prime Minister based her reply" and further "The Prime Minister's Office themselves spoke to the Chief Education Officer".

Mr. Holt's Solicitors have now asked Mr. Holt to check with No. 10 that what he has said was true. The Solicitors raised

N. Clarke.

We discussed + I agreed  
we should put this in the  
hands of T. Sol. R. let  
me know a day.

N.C.U.  
17.3.

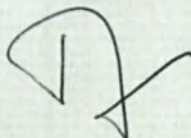


the possibility that the defendants issue subpoenas against people at 10 Downing Street.

Michael Alison has now asked for a reply to Mr. Holt giving the information he wants.

I am very uneasy about replying to Mr. Holt by giving a blow-by-blow account of enquiries made by this office, although they are harmless enough. Contrary to Mr. Holt's assertion, we would only have asked DES to make the relevant enquiries and that would have been done by Nicky Roche. But I would prefer to find some way, if we can, of keeping out of this litigation which strikes me as being extraordinarily pointless. If we are not careful, as the Solicitors point out, we are going to find either myself or Stephen Sherbourne or Nicky Roche called before the court to give evidence.

Could we have a word? I think the best course might be to seek the advice of the Treasury Solicitors.



Timothy Flesher

17 March 1986

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