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CCMA

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

30 April 1986

You ought to be aware of a difficulty we have had in relation to Mr Richard Holt MP and a libel action which he is bringing.

In May last year Mr Holt rang this office to give notice that, since he was on the Order Paper for Prime Minister's Questions, he would be asking a question about the action taken by teachers at a school near his constituency in which they left the Headmaster to cope on his own with the handicapped children for which the school provided. Subsequently we checked the position via the DES and the Prime Minister's reply was based upon the information which we received. I attach the Hansard of the exchange.

Subsequently there was a dispute between Mr Holt and the local NUT about the facts of the matter. This culminated in an article in the magazine "The Teacher" in which Mr Holt was accused of giving a false impression and leading the Prime Minister into giving an untrue response. Mr Holt subsequently decided to sue the magazine and the authors of the article for libel.

In the course of this action Mr Holt's solicitors have approached this office to strengthen his side of the case by the assertion that the facts set out in the exchange between Mr Holt and the Prime Minister were independently verified by No. 10. The first and relatively minor problem was that we had no independent source of information other than through the DES and the local education authority. The second and much

more difficult problem is that if Mr Holt's solicitors place in their formal evidence before the court a formula along the lines which he is suggesting there is a significant possibility, which Treasury Solicitors have confirmed, that a member of No 10 staff will be called to give evidence on the internal workings of this office. I think we can assume this is all the more likely since the NUT lawyers would probably be more interested in causing embarrassment than in seeking the truth.

We do not consider this risk to be acceptable and we have therefore indicated to the Treasury Solicitors that they should turn down the request for help by Mr Holt's solicitors. The Prime Minister has agreed with this course of action. In view of the fact that we are in essence rejecting a request for help from a Government backbencher, however, I thought that we should draw this to the attention of the Chief Whip. It may be necessary at some stage for the Chief Whip, if he thinks it appropriate, to have a word with Mr Holt to explain the difficulties and discuss whether there is anything else we might do for him.

I should be happy to discuss this if you think it helpful.

T Flesher

Murdo Maclean Esq

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. Kinnoch: 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?

The Prime Minister: The relief that has already been given to domestic ratepayers in Scotland has been very