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**EDUCATION REFORM: CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND
BOARD OF EDUCATION**

You will recall that the Bishop of London wrote to me on behalf of the Church of England Board of Education, criticising many of our education reform proposals. Those criticisms deserve a very robust reply. You will wish to know that I am today writing to the Bishop and, like him, releasing my letter to the Press. I enclose copies of his original letter and of my reply. I am also sending a copy of this note to Willie Whitelaw and David Waddington.

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Department of Education and Science

2 November 1987



ELIZABETH HOUSE
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The Rt Rev and Rt Hon Lord Bishop
of London
Chairman
The General Synod of the Church
of England
Board of Education
Church House
Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3NZ

2 November 1987

Dear Sir,

1. Thank you for your open letter on behalf of the Church of England's Board of Education. Your comments on the Government's policy give me the opportunity to clarify some fundamental points. I welcome this because your letter shows that we have not yet succeeded in communicating to you and your Board the full measure of the commitment from which we start. I hope that we will have an opportunity to meet and to discuss these matters.
2. First let me take your comment on our belief that British education must make a stronger contribution to national economic competitiveness: this is a consideration which you dismiss as "utilitarian and materialistic". Yet in your next paragraph you go on to argue that "until present levels of unemployment are significantly reduced" there is little point in attempting to interest pupils in improving their employability.
3. Surely your Board must have reflected on the connection between competitiveness and the level of employment? Indeed the Church of England's report 'Faith in the City', which makes numerous references to unemployment, quotes with approval an extract from the Government's 1985 White Paper 'Better Schools'. This extract states "It is vital that schools should remember that preparation for working life is one of their principal functions". The authors of 'Faith in the City' write "We believe that all parents, teachers and young people will agree with this". How is it that you now seem so readily to dismiss our concern with education for employment and national economic competitiveness?

4. Our City Technology Colleges initiative is an additional measure to help educate children living in disadvantaged urban areas where skill shortages often contribute to the problem of youth unemployment. Yet instead of welcoming this initiative the Churches have been distinctly cool towards it. We owe it to our young people to consider how pupils can be encouraged by their teachers and community leaders to recognise that the only sure road to employability lies in the acquisition of the skills and personal qualities which will enable them as individuals, and ourselves as a nation, to compete successfully in the world. This is a task in which I would have expected the Churches to be playing a leading role.

5. All this can and should be done without sacrificing the other, valid purposes of education. I have made clear that the important principle of the 1944 Act - that the aim of education is to contribute to the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community - provides a continuing framework for our purposes. The way in which the curriculum is offered to children is crucial in achieving this development. I wholly agree that education is not just about acquiring academic and technological skills. Indeed in my speech to the Conservative Party Conference I specifically addressed the importance of the moral dimension of education when I said "It is also essential that children are brought up within a moral framework so that they can acquire - during their time at school - a set of values which emphasises and encourages such qualities as honesty, responsibility, self-reliance and a concern for those less fortunate. These values should infuse the whole range of subjects, creating an ethos in the school and an inspiration to the children".

6. Second, while I accept that within society there must be a "sense of responsibility one for another", I think that there is a danger of slipping into the belief that this can only be realised by "co-operative endeavour". I believe that an essential part of responsibility is the exercise of choice - the exercise of free will. The purpose of our educational reforms is to engage a greater sense of responsibility on the part of all involved in education by extending the availability of choice. For those who can afford the fees for independent education, choice already exists. We now intend to extend that choice, within publicly provided education. Diversity does not equal privilege, as you seem to suggest; it offers people freedom to choose and new possibilities to secure the best for their children. The existence of Church schools means that there is already some measure of choice within the maintained system, indeed the churches are careful to guard their position. Surely your Board would not wish to stand in the way of extending choice to those other parents whose children are not in Church schools.

7. Third, the overriding aim of our measures is to lever up standards across the system as a whole. Your Board evinces a remarkably static approach to the question of standards. Their idea seems to be that "the raising of opportunity and standards at the upper end of the spectrum (will be) at the expense of those towards the lower end". Could they not admit an alternative hypothesis - under which all standards might be raised together? We believe that those high standards depend crucially upon high

aspirations. Many parents, of course, already have high aspirations for their children: it is now for schools and teachers to acknowledge and meet those aspirations. But you appear to underestimate the need for change and to undervalue the part that parents can play in securing that change. A number of schools already achieve a good deal but the overwhelming evidence of recent years is that the standards of our pupils are not as good as they should be, compared with some European counterparts, nor are they as good as they need to be. That is why we are introducing a National Curriculum - to raise standards in all schools across the country.

8. There is a potent relationship between releasing the latent power and sense of commitment of parents and raising standards. I do not believe that one can dismiss Her Majesty's Inspectorate's constant finding that schools' expectations of pupils are just too low. We seek to banish the blight of under-expectation. Our proposals for a national curriculum will set the framework for raising standards. I am surprised that you are not more supportive of these proposals. We aim to set out what should be taught, not how it should be taught, and I fail to see how the broad and balanced nature of the curriculum becomes in your eyes too academically pure and arid. The direct involvement of parents will be the guarantee of increased standards in all our schools through our proposals for more open enrolment, through greater responsibility on governing bodies and through the new opportunities which we shall offer parents to remove their schools from local authority control when they are dissatisfied with standards.

9. Fourth, may I comment upon your Board's ideas on "fairness". This is a concept which seems to underpin their faith in coercive planning: since resources are inherently limited, "external controls" are required to ensure that no one has greater access to them than does anyone else. May I draw to your Board's attention that there is an alternative conception of "fairness" which proposes not that people should be stopped from doing what they think best, but that they should be enabled to do so. As between these two alternative conceptions of what is fair and what is unfair, I have no doubt that the latter, positive, idea is the one which best corresponds with the instincts and traditions of the British people.

10. Lastly, we attach great value to the work of responsible LEAs. But we cannot leave parents at the mercy of those few irresponsible local authorities, some of whose actions have deeply offended many parents' religious sensibilities. It is vital that parents should have redress. Moreover, we believe that the measures we propose will be powerful incentives for local education authorities generally to become more responsive to local wishes and needs and to reflect those wishes in their planning. We shall expect local government, working with the Churches within the partnership established by the 1944 Act, to exercise a substantial continuing responsibility for securing an effective education service in their areas.

11. You suggest, in your concluding paragraph, that these reforms are precipitate. Here, again, I cannot agree with you. Concern on a wide national basis about the quality of British

education has been growing for more than a decade. Since we came into office in 1979 we have done much to meet that concern. But it is now more than ten years since James Callaghan launched the "Great Debate" on education. The purpose of all debates is, essentially, to reach conclusions. The time for conclusions has now come, and I hope that your Board will recognise the opportunities which our proposals afford for the Church of England, working with parents, teachers and local authorities, to reinforce its educational vocation.

Yours ever
Kenneth



THE GENERAL SYNOD OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Board of Education

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ADVICE

29 September 1987

The Rt Hon Kenneth Baker MP
Secretary of State for Education and Science
Department of Education and Science
Elizabeth House
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- cc Mr. Schindler
- Mr. Carbon
- Mr. Roberts
- Mr. Bailey
- Mr. AC Jeffrey
- Mr. RH Best
- Mr. Halsbury
- Mr. Stuart
- Mr. Bacon
- Mr. Norbury (advance copy)
- Mr. Caring
- Mrs. Douglas
- Mr. Green
- Mr. Duncan
- Mr. Kerpel

See +
7c to SS
→ Mr. Norbury
Cdyb
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Dear Secretary of State,

In addition to responding to the individual consultation papers my Board has felt it important that a general comment be made on the whole package of proposals relating to schools. I am therefore addressing the following remarks to you in the form of an open letter.

We should state initially and emphatically that we welcome the Government's intentions both to enhance the quality of provision in the nation's schools and to draw parents more fully into the partnership of those responsible for this provision. We have made these points more fully in previous comment and simply repeat them here as an indication that we still maintain the same basic line of approach reflected in, for example, Positive Partnership (published in 1985).

We are, however, deeply concerned about some of the implications and pre-suppositions which are to be found in the Government's actual proposals. First, we believe it to be important to indicate the precise meaning behind the assertion that "standards of attainment must be raised throughout England and Wales" (The National Curriculum, para 7). We do not accept that standards in every school in the country are lower than they ought to be. There are many schools already achieving very high standards indeed. We do accept that the average level of attainment is lower than it should be, but we believe the implication of this is that the standard of the poorer schools should be raised. Many of the proposals currently before us are likely to result in a raising of opportunity and standard in the schools towards the upper end of the spectrum, at the expense of those towards the lower end. The principle that one should discourage bad practice simply by encouraging good may be a sound principle in certain circumstances, but does not apply in the case of a national education system. The effect of the present proposals will be to increase the existing disparities between schools, and to defeat the commendable purpose that pupils should have "the same opportunities wherever they go to school" (*ibid*). We believe the Government should seek to develop policies which lead to the improvement of all schools, not just of one or two schools in each area.

We also believe that these policies should be related to the realities of the situation; i.e. based on dependable research findings. The present proposals seem to have been born of a spirit of desperation, almost as if people were saying "Anything different from the present system must be better". Much more careful thought and investigation needs to be undertaken before such major innovations are introduced. There can be no assurance that the present proposals will actually produce the results they are intended to.

The second main point we want to raise concerns the overall vision of education which inspires the Government's plans. Again this is a point we have made in previous submissions, but without much apparent effect. We welcome the reference near the beginning of the National Curriculum document to "policies ... which will develop the potential of all pupils and equip them for the responsibilities of citizenship and for the challenges of employment in tomorrow's world" (para 4), though we would have liked to see some reflection there of the significance and potential worth of each individual in his/her own right and not just as a citizen and employee/er. Far less welcome is the emphasis later revealed (in para 6) on raising standards "at least as quickly as they are rising in competitor countries". The motivation behind the proposed reform still seems to be essentially utilitarian and materialistic.

This narrow focus limits the thinking underlying the proposals in a way which has very practical consequences. The proposals do not reflect the likely motivation of the pupils. Until present levels of unemployment are significantly reduced many pupils will feel little interest in a curriculum which is identified as being geared to "the challenges of employment", particularly if those in turn are identified as being mainly to do with technological expertise.

The use of the term "competitor countries" is reflected in the stress being placed in the new proposals on competition as an incentive to learning. We wish to emphasise very strongly that real achievement, real quality, real success comes only when that competitive spirit is set in the larger context of a sense of responsibility one for another, and is therefore matched by a recognition of the fundamental importance of co-operative endeavour.

By expressing these hesitations about the overall vision of education which appears to underly the Government's plans, we are not advocating the maintenance of a traditionally academic approach to the curriculum. (Ironically, the proposals for a "subject-based" curriculum as set out in the consultation paper looks, despite the addition of technology as a "subject", very much like the worst manifestations of the old approach whose relevance to the modern world has long been called in question.) We believe that the ideas being explored over the past few years under the label "education for capability" are much more appropriate to the needs of pupils in twenty-first century Britain than either the academic purities of the subject based approach, or the utilitarian aridity underlying much of the phraseology of the introductory paragraphs in the National Curriculum paper and elsewhere.

But as well as these more directly educational concerns, the Board believes it is necessary to raise questions which have a quite specific political dimension. We would share the Government's belief that control of resources should lie as close as possible to those for whose benefit the resources are provided, and therefore welcome in principle the idea of financial delegation. But we recognise that there must be some remaining external controls to ensure a basic fairness in the overall availability of resources (especially when resources are limited). We believe that this applies also to physical resources, which is why we cannot support an entirely "open" admissions system. The untrammelled operation of market forces is not appropriate to the provision of a public good. Creeping privatisation of the education system is no more acceptable than would be the outright handing over of all schools to commercial enterprises.

It is for these reasons that the Board still has some major reservations about the proposal for introducing grant-maintained status. This could lead to the creation not just of "an alternative system" thereby increasing parental choice, but of "a privileged sector" established at the expense of the rest of the system and thereby actually decreasing the extent of significant choice open to large numbers of parents. It would surely be possible so to use the new mechanisms of financial delegation and open enrolment (within the "safeguards" of a National Curriculum) to create that degree of independence of local authority bureaucracy which is desirable, without abandoning all possibility of a local co-ordination of the system such as would ensure that a reasonably fair spread of provision is maintained. To take the further step of establishing the full "autonomy" of some schools (apart, possibly, from a few exceptional cases) seems to be a quite unnecessary complication.

The question must therefore be asked as to whether there are additional objectives being served by the proposal, to do with relations between national and local government. It is quite clear that the effect of large scale adoption of grant maintained status will weaken the position of local government in a fundamental way. This is a development which we would not find acceptable. We see the maintaining of strong (and responsible) local government as an essential element in the future of democracy in this country - and, even if we did not, we would still deplore the use of the education system as a pawn in what was essentially a political intention.

It is because so many important questions ultimately affecting the relationships between Church and State (at both local and national level) are involved in the current proposals that we are disturbed by the speed with which the Government is rushing towards legislation. Preparatory work on the 1944 Education Act necessarily took months, not weeks. The result was a solid base of agreement, fully accepted by the Church. The development of a new pattern of educational provision in this country surely requires no less a depth of preparation.

Yours sincerely

+ Graham London:

Chairman