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PRIME MINISTER

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

I enclose a brief which addresses the general line of argument in the memorandum sent to you by Michael Alison, James Pawsey and Caroline Cox, for discussion at our meeting on Tuesday 29 March.

I think that we are all agreed about the need for Christianity to have a central place in religious education syllabuses. As I reported at our meeting last week, the Churches - Anglican, Catholic and Methodist - are strongly opposed to any mention of Christian or Christian based religious education on the face of the Bill. The Anglican Bishops will oppose any amendment on these lines which is brought forward in the Lords and the Catholics are likely to brief their lay peers on similar lines.

At the same time, the Churches entirely accept that they have a duty to ensure that Christianity is given due emphasis in local religious education syllabuses. In my discussions with them last week, they agreed to work hard to strengthen religious education, in particular its Christian content. For our part we agreed to amend the Bill so that religious education is part of every school's "basic curriculum" and to strengthen arrangements for drawing up and monitoring religious education syllabuses through the local committees.

I have today written to Church leaders to secure their further assurances that they will do everything in their power to reinvigorate religious education and to secure that Christianity should have a central place in religious

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syllabuses. It might be helpful if you yourself could see them soon, perhaps over lunch, to impress on them the importance we attach to their acting on this undertaking.

KB.

KB

28 March 1988

Department of Education and Science

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EDUCATION REFORM BILL: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

(COX/ALISON/PAWSEY MEMORANDUM TO PRIME MINISTER)

PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING ON 29 MARCH

BRIEF

1. There is no disagreement with the main thesis of the memorandum - that Christianity should be central to religious education, so that all pupils may learn about the Christian beliefs and values which have shaped our culture.

2. The Churches believe that it would be both undesirable and unnecessary to have an explicit statutory requirement that religious education should be Christian. It would be undesirable for the following reasons:

i) if religious education had to be Christian, ethnic minority pupils would be withdrawn in large numbers by their parents. Schools would also come under increasing pressure to arrange separate religious education and worship for non-Christian pupils. At present very few pupils are withdrawn;

ii) those who formulated the 1944 provisions stressed the unifying role of religious education. It was envisaged that the Jews (our only significant religious minority at the time) would be involved in drawing up local agreed syllabuses. The emphasis was on allowing as many pupils as possible to participate in religious education, not on religious exclusivity.

?? The unifying role of religious education is all the more important in today's multi-racial society.

4. Lady Cox's proposed amendment is unnecessary because:

i) Christianity is still at the core of local syllabuses. In areas where there are large numbers of pupils of other faiths, due regard is paid to

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this. But even in authorities such as Birmingham and ILEA, their syllabuses stress the central importance of Christianity. Annex A to this brief quotes from a number of agreed syllabuses which show the centrality of Christianity;

ii) the Secretary of State has just reached an agreement with the Churches to strengthen the position of religious education. Religious education will be part of the "basic curriculum" (Clause 2 of the ERB); LEAs will be required to have Standing Advisory Councils on religious education and to update their agreed syllabuses regularly. LEAs will also have to set up procedures for hearing any complaints about non-compliance with the law on religious education (eg schools not following their local agreed syllabus). For their part, the Churches have said that they will take responsibility for seeing that the Christian content of syllabuses is secured;

iii) the new complaints procedures, and the increased vigilance of the Churches should all help to ensure that schools do provide religious education in accordance with the law and in accordance with the newly agreed religious syllabuses;

iv) the supply of qualified religious education teachers should be adequate to ensure that the subject has its proper place in the curriculum. And the Secretary of State for Education and Science has made in-service training for religious education teachers a national priority.

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AGREED SYLLABUSES: REFERENCES TO CHRISTIAN CONTENT

BIRMINGHAM - 1975

"Everyone should, nevertheless, recognise that education for life in Britain today must include adequate treatment of Christianity as the faith which has, historically, moulded British life and culture and is still doing so". In secondary schools in Birmingham the syllabus requires one major and three minor courses to be taken. One of these courses must be in Christianity. No other religion is given such prominence."

CAMBRIDGESHIRE - 1982

"This Conference, while recognising that pupils' cultural background will vary, believes that we have an educational responsibility to see that Christianity is the religion which should be studied in the greatest detail."

DEVON - 1983

"For cultural and historical reasons as well as its present importance, the study of Christianity is basic to religious education."

DURHAM - 1982

"Durham schools exist in an environment which is not multi-cultural in the same sense as that in which schools in some other parts of Britain find themselves. Therefore, although children should explore other religions of the world, they should be given especially the opportunity of gaining a sound knowledge and understanding of Christianity, the religion which has had a profound influence upon their environment and culture."

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HAMPSHIRE - 1978

"Although the context of religious education will vary from place to place, its content will be drawn largely from the study of Christianity in its many forms, this being the religious faith which has most influenced our culture."

ILEA - 1984

"Christianity has been of great importance in shaping British history, institutions, art and culture. It continues to be a living religion and a knowledge of it helps children to understand the society in which they are growing up. While it is taken for granted that Christianity features clearly, the syllabus also provides for teaching other important faiths."

MANCHESTER

"Whilst it is taken for granted that Christianity features clearly, the syllabus also provides for teaching about other important beliefs which are held in contemporary British society."

REDBRIDGE - 1987

"Redbridge acknowledges the importance of Christianity which continues to be the majority faith practiced in the borough and to which recognition is given in the syllabus. Our national heritage and language have been greatly influenced by Christian beliefs which have helped to shape our laws, our culture and our values. It will therefore be expected to feature in the RE programme of all our schools."

SALFORD - 1987

"The framework on which this syllabus is based establishes Christianity as the faith to be studied in greatest detail. It recognises that Christianity should be explored in some depth since it is the faith which has moulded and had the greatest influence on our British life and culture."

SURREY - 1987

"For centuries past the Christian faith has been predominant in this country. This faith has played a major part in shaping our country's history and traditions, culture, code of morals and laws. A knowledge of the story, the beliefs and the present form of the Christian religion are thus essential background to other studies at school."

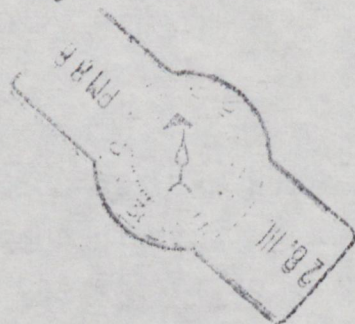
WILTSHIRE - 1980

"Some teachers have felt that recent approaches to RE have placed too great an emphasis on the study of other world religions at the expense of Christianity. It is important to notice that in this syllabus content will be drawn largely from the study of Christianity in its many forms."

WOLVERHAMPTON - 1987

"Although Christianity, as the major faith and as a formative factor in the prevailing ethos of the country is likely to occupy a prominent place in the schools' RE teaching, no particular faith will be taught as the one true religion by comparison with which others are studied only as contrast."

EDUCATION: general Policy 1717



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10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Principal Private Secretary

23 March 1988

Here is the letter from Michael Alison MP enclosing the memorandum about the subject which he hopes to discuss with the Prime Minister next Tuesday, 29 March. Your Secretary of State will wish to see this memorandum before his discussion with the Prime Minister tomorrow afternoon.

I should be grateful if you could let us have briefing for the Prime Minister's meeting with Mr. Alison, Lady Cox and Mr. Pawsey which takes account of the points made in the memorandum attached. This briefing will need to take account of the outcome of the Prime Minister's discussion with your Secretary of State.

|| Please could we have the briefing for the meeting with Mr. Alison by 1700 hours on Monday 28 March.

I am sending copies of this letter to the Private Secretaries to the Lord Privy Seal and to the Minister of State in your Department.

N.L. WICKS

Chris de Grouchy, Esq.,
Department of Education and Science.

ca



10 DOWNING STREET

PRIME MINISTER

Mr. Baker has now asked to come to discuss this with you and with Mrs. Rumbold. I have arranged a meeting for Thursday afternoon (by finding time in the diary by moving less urgent meetings until after Easter).

N. L. W.

N. L. WICKS

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'N.L.W.' with a stylized flourish.

22 March 1988



cc BUP

10 DOWNING STREET

Prime Minister

Please see

2 new papers by

- Brian Griffiths

and

- Michael Alison.

N. L. W.

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PRIME MINISTER

23 March 1988

cc REP

Religious Education in Schools

The meeting which Kenneth Baker and Angela Rumbold have requested is to launch a pre-emptive strike against the Alison-Cox proposals - the precise details of which we do not yet have.

From casual conversations which I have had with RE teachers over the past two years when visiting schools their argument would, I think, run something as follows:

The Alison-Cox Case

1. RE is a compulsory subject in schools because all children should know something of religion.
2. Britain is still a predominantly Christian country;
 - this is what most people say when asked in opinion polls;
 - we still have an Established Church;
 - Parliament begins its official business each day with an act of Christian prayer;
 - Many important occasions in our national life are either Christian services or services which take place in Christian churches (Remembrance Day, Falklands War thanksgiving etc);

- the Sovereign at her/his Coronation declare themselves to be the Defender of the Faith;

[Coronation Service, HM Queen Elizabeth II, 2 June 1953

"Archbishop: Will you to the utmost of your power maintain the Laws of God and the true profession of the Gospel? Will you to the utmost of your power maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law? Will you maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England, and the doctrine, worship, discipline, and government thereof, as by law established in England? And will you preserve unto the Bishops and Clergy of England, and to the Churches there committed to their charge, all such rights and privileges, as by law do or shall appertain to them or any of them?

Queen: All this I promise to do."]

3. They also make much of the fact that it is impossible to:

- read English literature (Milton, Shakespeare, Browning, Eliot etc) without some knowledge of the Bible (and of course Church and Roman mythology);
- understand crucial events and periods in British history (reformation and Cromwell, Wesley, Clapham Sect and social reform of first half of 19th century, Irish question etc) without some understanding of the social dimension of Christian teaching;
- appreciate our educational system, in that most of our older universities and the majority of our schools grew out of our Christian heritage;

4. Although Church attendance has declined dramatically during this century it would be incorrect to say that we have become a pluralistic religious society in which the Christian religion is simply one amongst others. Although Asian immigration has led to an increase in Islam, Hinuism and Sikhism, these religions together with Judaism, are observed by a minority.

5. No one wishes to see RE as indoctrination and the preparation for personal commitment; nor do they wish to see it as the vehicle for teaching fundamentalism.

They would however like a balanced syllabus - say two-thirds Christian religion and one-third other religions - with the syllabus on the Christian religion covering:

- the creeds and Christian doctrine;
- Church history;
- some textual analysis
- impact of Christian faith on society.

6. What these people object to most of all is RE being presented as a pot-pourri of liberal humanism in which (i) religion is taught as philosophy or sociology, (ii) the major thrust is the discovery of values which are the lowest common denominator of all world religions, (iii) a strong belief in relativism means that all religions are considered equal. (See enclosed letter which arrived unexpectedly yesterday)

Arguments against the Alison-Cox proposals

These are the kind of arguments which you should expect from Kenneth Baker and Angela Rumbold.

1. "It does not have the support of the Bishops"

This is certainly true of the Bishop of London: but what evidence does the Secretary of State have that it is true of all Bishops in the House of Lords?

2. "It would split the Party"

Michael Alison says that there is wide support for it among the Members and that he is also being encouraged by Labour members.

Once again, what hard evidence do the Ministers have to support their view?

3. "We are a multi-faith society"

Does this mean that we are to give each world religion an equal amount of time in RE teaching?

Or does it mean that we settle for some synchronistic liberal form of humanism - in which students learn little hard knowledge about any religion?

4. "More parents will withdraw children from RE lessons"

What is the evidence for this, other than surmise?

5. "In any case what is Christianity"

Is it not possible to teach something of the variety of Christian Churches and ^{different} defining interpretations of Christian doctrine and ethics?

Recommendation

It is important for Michael Alison and Caroline Cox to produce a paper which argues their case.

The basic question is an important one: if RE is compulsory should we be concerned about what is taught?

Until this is done and debated it would seem premature to take a decision.

Brian Griffiths

BRIAN GRIFFITHS



Incorporating Avery Hill College

Your ref
Our ref
Ext 228
Date 18th March, 1988.

Avery Hill Campus Bexley Road London SE9 2PQ
Telephone 01-850 0081

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION
Head of School A J Cooper MA BLitt DipEd

Professor Brian Griffiths,
c/o 10, Downing Street,
Westminster,
SW1.

Dear Professor Griffiths,

I realise that one should not believe everything that appears in the press, but I understand from some reports that you are part of a group concerned to high light the place of Christian values in government policy. As one who would be broadly supportive of what appear to be the aims, may I suggest a fairly obvious step which the government appear reluctant to take. It would be helpful if the position of Religious Studies in schools was seen to be supported by including it in the proposed 'core' curriculum as an assessed subject, by improving the supply and training of teachers and, if possible, by assuring a higher level of Christian, or at least genuinely religious, content.

For over twenty years I have taught Religious and Theological Studies in this institution to prospective teachers and others. During that time there seems to have been mounting pressure, especially from ILEA, against anything which could be described as positive Christian theology. This is not just a legitimate demand for recognition of major non-Christian religions, but a move towards treating all religion as a kind of sub-branch of sociology or philosophy. Naturally this discourages potentially good teachers of the subject from a career in this area. Meanwhile, as you will know, there has been a growing interest in Christianity, especially among young people. For instance we have no problems in getting candidates for a degree in Theological Studies, which is largely Christian, but our students are not attracted to teaching. At the same time Black-led churches have flourished and become a potent force in some inner-city areas. These are movements for good which could be tapped.

Letters to MPs receive courteous replies but amount to an appeal to the current legal situation which seems to be failing in this area. There are in our schools committed teachers, trained in other disciplines, who would probably re-train for this area if the training (say a one-year course) were available and if it was clear that the work had government support. A relatively small sum invested here might produce good profits in future years, it would also win this administration some friends within a section of the community which is supportive of many of its policies on moral issues but may feel alienated by some of its perceived attitudes.

You and I have had 'second-hand' contact through the magazine Third Way with which I was closely involved for some years. I trust you will take this approach as an attempt to be constructive.

Yours sincerely,

B.G. Worrall.

Theological Studies.

THE RT. HON. MICHAEL ALISON, M.P.

CCB/OP

HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA



23rd March 1988

The Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London SW1

Dear Margaret,

I am enclosing a memorandum about the subject which we hope to discuss with you next Tuesday, signed by Caroline Cox, James Pawsey, and myself. I hope that it will help you in understanding the case we wish to make to you.

Yours ever
Michael

Michael Alison



cc BSp

HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Memorandum for the Prime Minister

Christian religious education in schools

1. We urge you to take the opportunity offered by the passage of the Education Reform Bill to specify that religious instruction in schools should be predominantly Christian. Guidelines should provide that, in such instruction, the study of the Christian religion - its scriptures, its significance in our history and culture, and its contemporary relevance - should predominate. The promulgation of these guidelines could take the form either of an appropriate addition to Clause 6(1) of the Bill (which provides for compulsory religious instruction); or an appropriate amendment to section 29 of the Fifth Schedule to the Education Act 1944, so as to secure that the guidelines were observed in the preparation of locally agreed RE syllabuses.

2. We urge this course upon you because it can no longer be assumed that, unqualified, the phrase "religious instruction" in the Education Reform Bill will be interpreted and understood to mean the Christian religion. In the 1944 Education Act, the reference in section 25(2) to compulsory religious instruction is clearly a reference to the Christian religion. This was manifestly the unwritten assumption amongst the Anglicans, the Catholics, the Free Churchmen, and others who debated and formulated the religious provisions of the 1944 Act. But in transposing their formulation outwardly unchanged to the 1988 Bill, Ministers have already indicated that the underlying assumption about the Christian religion can no longer be taken for granted. Lord Arran, for the Government, said in the House of Lords recently that



"Those responsible for drafting the 1944 Act would certainly have envisaged that the religious education in our schools would be predominantly Christian in character. However, nowhere in the Act is there any requirement that religious education should be Christian".
(OR 26th February 1988 Col.1483)

Lord Arran's approach points clearly to the scope offered by the lack of definition in the 1944 Act, for its unwritten intentions to be effectively repudiated. Indeed he went on in his speech to justify a "shift of emphasis" in current religious teaching precisely by reason of the 1944 Act's absence of specification. But we do not believe that it is either right or desirable to pay lip-service to our RE inheritance from 1944, by transplanting its outward form to the 1988 Bill, if in reality we have discarded its Christian kernel. The time is ripe, therefore, to reassert and specify the primacy of the Christian religion in RE.

3. In urging this course upon you, we do not pretend to ignore some fundamental changes in social and religious attitudes, or in educational insights, which have occurred in Britain since 1944. We recognise that in the years from 1944 until the early 1960s, LEA agreed syllabus planners, as well as their manuals and textbooks, continued to be influenced by the confessional thinking of much earlier generations, and that this approach might not fit in well with modern conditions. We recognise that, in an increasingly secular society, and one with substantial immigrant elements in it, the older forms of teaching Christianity - simple, uncritical, and prescriptive - might be neither right nor appropriate. But we are convinced that the very changes we have noted make it more desirable, not less, to re-establish by statute the primacy of Christian teaching at the centre of religious instruction, even if the form of that teaching needs some adaptation.



4. For the current fashion is to swing so violently away from the earlier confessional approach, as to do both educational and spiritual damage to our children. The RE syllabus makers of the 1960s and 1970s, taking their cue from the growth of immigration, the growth of travel, and the growth of television (with its projection of the world as a global village), started the trend which led to the emphasis of comparative religion. A "world's religions" approach to school religious instruction has since become the vogue.

The 1984 ILEA Agreed Syllabus, for example, now requires that children in London secondary schools should receive teaching on all the major world religions: Hinduism, Judaism, Islam and Sikhism as well as Christianity.

The 1975 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus stated that "Birmingham world faiths must be included in the syllabus - Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism and at sixth-form level, Buddhism"; and "in addition, interest is being shown in many of the ideas basic to what have often been described as 'secular faiths'" (a clear reference to the admissibility of Marxism). New GCSE syllabuses are also cause for concern; in some, it is possible to choose a course with no Christian content at all. Baroness Cox recently claimed in the House of Lords that our young people are being presented -

"with a form of extreme relativism in which all belief systems are presented in a value free hotch-potch as exemplified in a book which I am told by teachers is widely used in RE. It is called Beginning Religion...It shows page after page of grotesque and sometimes frightening pictures of religious rituals such as human sacrifice and a spine-chilling photograph of an Aborigine initiation ceremony. The Lord's Prayer is discussed on the same page as Shamanism. There is considerable emphasis on the occult. This edition actually suggests that children should try to find out what happens at a seance. I gather this has been omitted from a later edition. However, preoccupation with the occult and with phenomena such as witchcraft is a recurring theme in many RE courses.

Parents in York report that a class used all its RE lessons for a whole term to learn about witchcraft, including the use of videos of witches' covens".



5. The educational and spiritual damage we have instanced above scarcely needs elaboration. Suffice to say that, with a maximum of one period a week available in many secondary schools, there is hardly time for pupils to achieve a satisfactory grasp of our nation's Christian faith and heritage, let alone explore several of the world's other major religions in any depth.

Ronald Knox's witticism that "there is nothing like comparative religions for making a person comparatively religious" has an uncomfortably sharp applicability to the RE scene we have described. We are convinced that it is better educationally to know one religion fairly well, and from that firm basis to evaluate the claims of others, rather than to offer pupils in effect a world religions supermarket, in which they are faced with a bewildering range of - ostensibly equally valid - choices.

We are equally convinced that the religion which should be predominantly taught in all our schools should be the Christian religion. For all its secularism, Britain remains a Christian society. In T S Eliot's words, "A society has not ceased to be Christian until it has become positively something else". The 1983 Office of Population Censuses and Surveys' survey concluded that the number of children in state schools whose country of origin disposed them to have a non-Christian cultural heritage was a little under 4 per cent. The comprehensive Bible Society/Gallup Poll survey of 1986 yielded the figure of 85 per cent of the population that liked to think of itself as Christian. And, like a cathedral, our historical heritage still dominates our contemporary civilisation. In regard to Britain, Lord Blake has written of the Christian religion that -



"it is quite impossible to understand its political and cultural developments unless one understands the nature of religion which under changing forms and differing institutions permeated the consciousness of men and women, conditioned their ideas, shaped their politics and inspired so much of their culture".

6. It might seem paradoxical that we have complained of the Christian paucity of RE syllabuses, when those syllabuses themselves are the product of local conference agreement under 1944 Education Act, involving representatives of the major church denominations, and actually providing for a Church of England right of veto. But for various reasons, the existing arrangements have manifestly proved inadequate. For one thing, Christian clergy and teachers alike, reflecting the decline in national church attendance and religious consciousness, have begun themselves to show a lack of confidence in Christianity and its right to occupy the major part of the RE timetable. Baroness Blatch, with her long experience in local government, has vividly complained of the lack of clerical support in RE syllabus conferences, almost of a "trahison des clerics":

"Where were they as I sat around the table with my colleagues on the Standing Conference for Religious Education, fighting like a tiger to retain an element of Christianity as a predominant part of religious education in the curriculum? I went to see a bishop, putting a heart-felt plea for his support in the work we are trying to do. A quarter of the conference, like a quarter of the conferences in many counties, is made up of Church of England appointees. They were not the people to whom I could look for support. That was a great disappointment to me".



Furthermore, many local education authorities, especially left-wing authorities in inner cities, actively seek to promote the marginalizing of Christianity in their locally-agreed syllabuses. LEAs, after all, themselves appoint members to the various committees involved in drawing up a locally agreed syllabus. Worse still, in many areas the locally agreed syllabus is not followed at all; for example, in neither North Tyneside or Newcastle does any secondary school follow the syllabus.

7. We have written enough, we believe, to justify the plea we make to you in our opening paragraph. The amendments we propose may not be sufficient to reform and revitalise the proper conduct of RE in our schools. But they are the necessary first step, without which a bad situation will get worse.

23rd March 1988

Caroline Cox

Michael Alison

James Pawsey



10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Principal Private Secretary

23 March 1988

I am writing to acknowledge your letter of today with which you enclosed a memorandum on Christian religious education in schools. I will certainly let the Prime Minister know that you wish to discuss this with her when you see her next week.

(N.L. Wicks)

The Rt. Hon. Michael Alison, M.P.

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10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Principal Private Secretary

14 March 1988

Dear Tom,

EDUCATION REFORM BILL

As you may know, Baroness Cox, together with some other MPs, is coming to see the Prime Minister on Tuesday 29 March. Lady Cox has given an indication to the Lord Privy Seal of a matter that she is likely to raise with the Prime Minister.

The Lord Privy Seal understands that Lady Cox intends to table amendments in the Lords to the Education Reform Bill which would have the purpose of making religious education and acts of worship in schools explicitly Christian in content. The Lord Privy Seal believes that Lady Cox's intention is not to preserve the status quo on Christian religion in schools, but to take a major step forward in ensuring the teaching of Christianity within schools. The Lord Privy Seal believes that Lady Cox's amendment might be well received in the Lords and the Bill could indeed be amended as she seeks, particularly if the Bishops supported her approach.

The Prime Minister does see some force in Lady Cox's approach and would like your Secretary of State's advice.

The Prime Minister would also be grateful if you could provide a note which indicated the present statutory position regarding the teaching of Christianity and Christian acts of worship in schools; of how the present statutory position would be altered by the Education Reform Bill; and the effect of Lady Cox's approach. The Prime Minister presumes that the existing statutory position originates in the Education Act 1944. She would like to be reminded of what was said in Parliament about the intention of the relevant sections in the 1944 Act as was evidenced in the speeches made to Parliament by the Government spokesman at the time.

More generally, I think the Prime Minister would be grateful for advice from the Secretary of State and the Lord Privy Seal on the tactics which the Government should follow with regard to the amendment which Lady Cox seems intent on proposing, taking account of the Lord Privy Seal's view that her amendment might well be accepted in Their Lordship's House.

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B/F // Since the Prime Minister may wish to discuss this matter with your Secretary of State and the Lord Privy Seal before her meeting with Lady Cox on 29 March, I should be grateful if you could let me have your Secretary of State's advice by close of play on Monday 21 March.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Mike Eland in the Lord Privy Seal's Office and to Sir Robin Butler.

Yours sincerely
Nigel Wicks

N.L. WICKS

T.B. Jeffery, Esq.,
Department of Education and Science.