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From the Principal Private Secretary

12 April 1988

Dear Tom,

CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

The Prime Minister held a meeting today to discuss with Lady Cox, Michael Alison MP, James Pawsey MP and Anthony Coombs MP Christian religious education in schools. Your Secretary of State and Professor Brian Griffiths were also present. The meeting had before it Michael Alison's letters of 23 March and 8 April.

Lady Cox said that she was pleased with the Secretary of State's announcement in the Commons regarding religious education (RE), but she wished to go further still. Her concern related to the present trends in RE in many parts of the country. The emphasis on multi-faith studies led to nihilist thinking and the politicisation of some religious teaching led to secularisation. Lady Cox then handed to the Prime Minister some books used in schools, including some produced by the Christian Education Movement and CND, in support of her case. She believed that the only way to stop these undesirable trends was to insert in the Education Reform Bill a requirement that RE should be predominantly Christian-based. The locally agreed syllabuses did not meet the objective; and she cited an example from the Dudley's syllabus in support of her point. In some places, it was possible to take a GCSE RE examination without reference to Christianity. Mr. Alison thought that many Bishops, including those on the attached list, supported the amendment to the legislation proposed by Lady Cox. He accepted that some Bishops, including the Bishop of London, were reluctant to say so in public, fearing that if they supported such an amendment and it was lost, the position of Christian education would be in a worse position than under the proposed legislation.

The delegation then went on to make the following additional points. The legislation should obviously allow parents to withdraw their children from the predominantly Christian-based RE if they so chose. But it should not be assumed that all non-Christian faiths would take advantage of this facility. Some Muslims, for example, would want their children to attend Christian-based lessons in acknowledgement of their religion's belief that Christ was a Prophet. Christian-based education would not be safeguarded if syllabuses were left to local negotiations; Christians locally

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would not fight for their form of education unless they were given some sense of direction. The Bill lacked teeth in enforcing the practical implementation of sound Christian education in the schools. The Secretary of State should establish a National Advisory Commission to advise how religious education should be taught in schools. He should be given statutory powers so that he could give effect to the Commission's findings. Mr. Pawsey referred to his letter of 17 March to the Prime Minister in which he advocated an amendment to clause 89 of the Education Reform Bill requiring collective worship to be Christian. It seemed from the reaction of the other members of the delegation that while they had sympathy with Mr. Pawsey's objective, they were not themselves pressing for his particular amendment.

The Secretary of State said that his understanding of the Bishop of London's position was different from Lady Cox's. He understood from a recent conversation with the Bishop that he was strongly opposed to the insertion of the words 'predominantly Christian-based' into the Bill and believed that such an amendment would be highly damaging to the cause of Christian education in schools. Cardinal Hume and the Catholic Bishop of Leeds, Bishop Konstant, were also opposed to such an amendment. He would shortly discuss the matter with the Chief Rabbi and the Leader of the Methodists. He expected them to express a similar view. He thought too that he would need to speak to the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Secretary of State believed that such an amendment would be divisive and would lead to more children being withdrawn from RE. The Government was not finally committed to any particular course and he was going to discuss the issue further with religious leaders.

There was some discussion about whether any amendment should refer to RE which was 'predominantly Christian-based', 'predominantly Biblical', 'predominantly Scriptural', or 'predominantly Judaeo-Christian'. Some preference was expressed for a formulation which referred to RE which was "predominantly but not exclusively Biblically-based" since this was thought least likely to offend other religions.

The Prime Minister told the MPs that the Secretary of State and herself fully supported their objective - a thorough teaching of Christian education within the schools so that the nation's children were aware both of the religious significance of Christian education and its contribution to the culture, history and way of life of the country. But the Secretary of State was clearly in real difficulty in negotiating such a clause on the lines sought by the delegation in view of the apparent opposition by church leaders. There was an established Church in England and it was difficult for a government to take an initiative regarding RE which did not have the open support of leaders of the Church of England. She wondered whether one possibility would be for Lady Cox to seek to have the arguments aired in a debate on the amendment and then to withdraw it. The advantage of this course was that it would enable the Bishops to say during the debate that RE should, of course, be

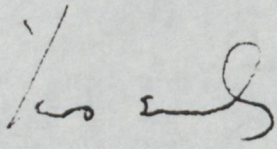


predominantly Christian and this would send a good signal to the local negotiations. Lady Cox's reaction to this proposal suggested that she was unwilling to do this since she asked whether the Government would undertake not to oppose such an amendment if it was pushed to a vote.

The Prime Minister then said that in his further discussions with Church leaders, the Secretary of State would ask how they intended to ensure that the locally-negotiated syllabuses made provision for religious education which was predominantly Christian-based. The Secretary of State should ensure that the Church leaders gave careful and thorough thought to this aspect and were not allowed to opt out of their responsibilities locally.

Concluding the discussion, the Prime Minister said that the delegation had heard that the Secretary of State was still exploring the issue and the Government was not finally committed to any particular course. It was clear that they shared a common objective. The Secretary of State and herself would need to consider further how that might be met.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the Private Secretary to the Lord Privy Seal.



Nigel Wicks

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