

PRIME MINISTER

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13 April 1988

English in the National Curriculum

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The Secretary of State proposes that you and colleagues agree to:

- (a) the publication of the Kingman Report and the establishment of a Working Group on English;
- (b) welcome the Kingman Report subject to the remarks made in para 5 of the Secretary of State's note;
- (c) agree to the terms of reference and supplementary guidance contained in a letter from the Secretary of State which are given in annexes D and E to the paper.

The Kingman Report

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The Report is something of a curate's egg. (I enclose a highlighted version). The good parts are:

- the importance of testing children about the language environment (1.12);
- the duty of schools to enable children to acquire Standard English (2.31);
- the model of the English language which is set out in Chapter 3 (and especially on page 31) contains many good features;



- the need for clear aims in the teaching of English (5.2 and 5.10);
- the attainment targets which are set out for all 16, 11 and 7 year olds (pages 92-97).

If these targets were met there would be little doubt that standards of literacy would be raised significantly in our country.

Against this however there is a lack of any real backbone to the Report; a nervousness about stating unequivocally that Standard English should be taught and examined throughout the country:

- Kingman's letter to the Secretary of State is very instructive: it is all about the description of language but not the prescription of Standard English for all schools;
- because of this teachers will then use their professional judgement about "the extent to which that description should be made explicit to their pupils": this puts the emphasis not on objective standards but subjective judgements by teachers;
- the Report strongly rejects the teaching of "old-fashioned grammar ... and learning by rote" (poetry? parts of Shakespeare?) 2.27; *memory things.*
- the section on teaching is quite vague: "testing needs to be defined as broadly as possible" 5.12.

The Report is likely to draw criticism both from progressives (the English teaching profession) and traditionalists (John Marenbon) - as it really satisfies no one.



In discussion of the Report the critical question which needs to be settled is how the Model which is developed in Chapter 3 relates to Kingman's letter to the Secretary of State. If the Model of Standard English were to be made prescriptive that would be fine: one's fear from the letter however is that the Model as it stands is simply a description of good English, and will only become prescriptive at the discretion of individual teachers. This would be nothing short of disastrous.

Secretary of State's requests:

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(a) Publication of the Report and establishment of a

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Working Group on English

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This is fine subject to your agreeing to the names of the Working Group.

(b) Welcome of the Committee's Report

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In view of the undesirable features of the Report, the Secretary of State's welcome needs to be very guarded. Otherwise the Report will be taken hook, line and sinker as the basis of the Working Party's terms of reference.

The ideal response would be for the Secretary of State to endorse Standard English, the Model outlined in Chapter 3 and the tests (Chapter 5) as prescriptive for all children in all schools.



(c) Terms of Reference and Supplementary Guidance

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These need substantial editing e.g. in the letter which he proposes sending ~~to the Chairman of the Committee~~ he suggests

- (a) in defining attainment targets for 16 year olds the starting point should be GCSE National Criteria! (para 10)
- (b) as a basis for their work the Committee might use the HMI paper 'English from 5-16': yet this was the reason for Marenbon writing the Centre for Policy Studies monograph 'English our English' (see pages 13-14) - which I enclose: his comments on HMI etc are devastating.

All in all you need to be far more cautious than the Secretary of State suggests.

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