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PRIME MINISTER

28 April 1988

Scottish Schools: Meeting with Strathclyde parents

On my visit to Scotland last week I met with nine parent leaders from three schools - Paisley Grammar, Notre-Dame and Our Lady and St Francis - all of which which are currently threatened with closure, and two of which would be saved by the new regulations the government has introduced recently.

While these parents cannot necessarily be taken as representative of other parents in either the Strathclyde region or Scotland as a whole, they expressed their views very forcibly and said that in their opinion there were many more parents who thought like them.

- (a) While they were generally happy with Scottish primary schools, they were less happy with the overall performance of secondary schools largely because of mixed ability teaching and the fact that discipline was not as strong as it should be.
- (b) They were committed to comprehensive schools and did not wish to see a return either to selection or charging.
- (c) They were hostile to the Labour controlled Strathclyde Regional Council (even though I found out later that one parent was a ward Chairman of the local Labour party, and the husband of another parent present was a Labour member of the Regional Council) primarily because in their judgement it was strongly opposed to their exercise of parental choice ("parents charter") granted under the 1980 Act.

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- (d) Although it had never been officially announced by Strathclyde Regional Council, they felt that school closures were targeted against single-sex schools and good academic schools (it also did not go unnoticed that the locations of the three schools present at the meeting were prime sites for redevelopment).
- (e) In terms of government education policy in Scotland they were very clear that saving their schools from closure was not sufficient: they all feared subsequent discrimination from Strathclyde, whose behaviour they described on more than one occasion as vindictive.
- (f) They all expressed interest in the possibility of the government introducing opting-out legislation as this would offer protection against Strathclyde: they emphasised however that one could not expect parental responses on this issue until the government had told people what precisely opting-out involved.
- (g) They claimed to speak for parents in other schools in wanting the government, urgently, to inform them of what opting-out in practice would mean in Scotland: how otherwise could parents be expected to have views?
- (h) They also stated that if the government delays making some announcement on opting-out, Strathclyde Regional Council (who have a very effective PR department) will conduct a concerted campaign against opting-out: in particular they will associate it with selection and fee-paying, make threatening noises about staff mobility between schools, etc and so damage what could prove a useful idea.

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- (i) They claimed they did not need years of experience on school boards in order to develop expertise to run schools: while this was true of some schools, it was certainly not true of others - and such schools deserved greater opportunity than they were at present being given.
- (j) Although all of the parental groups represented had responded to the government during the consultation process, their experience in Strathclyde over the past months was such that their views would now be significantly different from then.

#### Conclusions

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1. Parents of the schools represented, and they claimed of other schools in the region, are delighted at the government's recent initiative in issuing new regulations. I had an overwhelming impression however that unless we do more soon, they will find themselves under considerable threat, and inevitably question our genuine concern to do something.
2. Even if the government does not introduce an amendment, in this Bill, they all stated that the time was now right for the government to take some further initiative.

#### Recommendations

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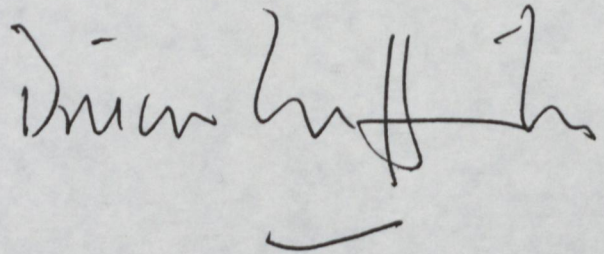
- ✓ 1. It would be welcomed if you said something on education in your Perth speech.

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2. Sometime ago you asked Malcolm Rifkind to prepare a paper on opting-out: the result of your last meeting with him however is that he will consult with the RC Church in Scotland and then report: at that stage it would be very useful if you could ask again for such a paper to be prepared for colleagues, if only to get the Scottish Office doing serious work on the issue.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Brian Griffiths". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

BRIAN GRIFFITHS