

PRIME MINISTER

MEETING OF E(EP): 19 MAY

There is just one formal paper on the agenda - the handling of the Higginson Report on 'A' levels. But there are a number of relevant papers:

- Flag A: E(EP)(88)10 - a joint paper by Messrs. Baker and Walker.
- Flag B: A further personal minute Kenneth Baker has sent you late this evening.
- Flag C: Cabinet Office brief
- Flag D: Two notes by Brian Griffiths - the first on the main paper and the second on Mr. Baker's later minute.

The formal Baker/Walker paper proposes a forthcoming response to the Higginson Report and an announcement that the Government endorses its recommendations for the general practice that should govern 'A' levels. But Mr. Baker's personal minute records his more cautious second thoughts (or perhaps more accurately the more cautious thoughts that his junior ministers have pressed on him). He is now coming back to the sort of approach that the Cabinet Office brief steers you towards; Brian's second note suggests you strongly endorse this revised approach. Brian's first fuller note spells out a number of aspects of the Higginson Report which will trouble you.

One point on handling. The formal paper is a joint one by Messrs. Baker and Walker. But Mr. Baker's personal minute has

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been sent only to you, and does not make clear whether
Mr. Walker is aware of it or of the thoughts in it. I suggest
you start the meeting by inviting Mr. Baker to introduce the
paper, when he will doubtless spell out his second thoughts.
Mr. Walker can then join in as he sees fit.

PLCG.

PAUL GRAY

18 May 1988

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GOVERNING BODIES FOR POLYTECHNICS

When you saw the latest papers over the weekend, you were doubtful about the DES proposal to resist Lady Cox's amendments to Schedule 5 of the Bill and to rely solely on the draft Articles of Government. I therefore persuaded DES to amend the line to be taken in Committee in the Lords on 16 May and for the Lord Chancellor to indicate that, while still doubtful about Lady Cox's amendments, he would draw her comments to Mr. Baker's attention.

Meantime, Lady Cox wrote to you over the weekend alerting you to the background, and urging the Government to take her amendments away and to consider them. She did indicate, however, that she would accept a compromise under which Schedule 5 was left unchanged as long as the managerial Articles of Government were satisfactory to the Polytechnic Directors.

I attach the Lords' Hansard for 16 May and a reply to Lady Cox for your signature.

Kenneth Baker will come back in due course with his proposals on the way forward.

Recd.

PAUL GRAY

18 May 1988

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'A' LEVELS: HIGGINSON COMMITTEE REPORT

E(EP)(88)10

DECISIONS

1. The joint paper, by the Secretaries of State for Education and Science and for Wales, seeks agreement that:

i. they should publish the report of the Higginson Committee on 'A' levels;

ii. Mr Baker should answer a Parliamentary Question with the text in Annex D which endorses the general principles recommended by the Committee and backs the aim of 5 "A" or "AS" level subjects for the majority of full-time A-level students;

and iii. they should invite the Schools Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC) to examine "the feasibility, practicality and cost" of the Committee's detailed recommendations.

2. The central question is whether the Sub-Committee is prepared at this early stage, without more ado, to endorse the Higginson Committee recommendation that students should normally take 5 'A' or 'AS' level subjects in future, rather than 3 as at present. This would be a major educational reform with considerable implications for schools and universities. It raises important issues about whether there would be a decline in existing standards, and whether it would lead to demands for a fourth year in degree courses in England and Wales. And it could arouse considerable public interest. If the Sub-Committee is content to endorse the general principles of the Report, without waiting for work to be done on the feasibility, practicality and cost of the recommendations, it will wish to agree to the approach which the Secretaries of State are



proposing. If it would prefer to consider the issues at a slower pace, the alternative would be to commission the further work and simply publish the report, inviting comments without endorsement.

BACKGROUND

3. In November 1986 Mr Baker sought your agreement to a review of the aims and objectives of 'A' level courses, their subject content and grading standards. You agreed to a review on the understanding that it would not provide a vehicle for any dilution of the existing standards of 'A' levels. You also suggested that the review should be asked to consider whether a core syllabus for each 'A' level subject should be established to cover all examining boards. Dr Gordon Higginson, and the other four members of his committee, were appointed in March 1987. Mr Baker proposes that their report, finished last month, should be published at the same time as he tables a written answer outlining the Government's response.

4. The report indicates that present 'A' level courses are taught for 8 periods a week, making 24 periods in total for a normal 3-subject course (para. 3.7). The remaining 16 periods are devoted to a combination of general - non-examinable - courses and private study. Last year the option of 'AS' levels was introduced; these are intended to be of the same standard as 'A' levels, but with half the course content, therefore requiring 4 periods a week. Under the new proposals 5 slimmer 'A' levels - requiring 6 periods a week each - would be the norm. This would result in 30 periods of teaching a week on examinable courses, placing a heavier load on students and teachers. The replacement of one or two of these 'A' levels by 'AS' levels would provide a slight reduction in this load.

5. The report argues that greater breadth at 'A' level - so that, for example, scientists could keep up a modern language to 'A' level and those on arts courses continue to take maths/computing - would produce more balanced and rounded 18 year olds. They suggest that such a curriculum would be more in line with the perceived needs of industry and commerce than the present system.



ISSUES

Academic Standards

6. One central question is whether a move to making the normal 'A' level course comprise 5 subjects would be consistent with maintaining high standards. The Higginson report argues that it is, and indeed that the time spent on each subject can be shortened while also increasing the intellectual rigour of the course. You may however want to probe this.

- a. What will be given up if the amount of time spent on a subject is reduced? The Higginson report says that 'A' level courses should do more to encourage 'such non subject-specific skills as communication and some of the personal qualities which are widely considered to be desirable - initiative, independence and a capacity to understand human behaviour' (para. 3.8). The report also says that time can be saved by reducing to a minimum time-consuming tasks with limited intellectual demands, and removing altogether the temporary committal to memory of inessential information (para. 3.9). It is not clear what all this would add up to in practice. Might it not open the way for 'A' levels to be easier and woollier, not more rigorous?

- b. Will there be a deliberate move away from the standards set by Universities? There are references in the report to the 'unnecessary dominance of University needs in the determination of 'A' level objectives', and to the need to take more account of the fact that many 'A' level candidates do not go on to University (paragraph 4.4). Arguably, however, it has been the influence of Universities which has maintained the present high standards in 'A' levels.

- c. Can the new Advanced Supplementary (AS) level courses, as is said, maintain the same standards as traditional 'A' level courses when they occupy only half the time (four periods a week as against eight)? The report stresses the importance in its proposals of the 'AS' level courses. These, for example, provide for some science study for arts students and



vice versa. The question is whether it is realistic to expect them to maintain standards. For instance, it is not clear what is meant by the statement in the report that 'AS' courses would be 'broad and practical'. (para. 5.13)

- d. Will there be enough provision for the very able? The report says that there will be a weaker case for retaining the present Special (S) papers which are taken by the very able (para. 8.9). You may want to probe this.

Implications for universities

7. You will want to ask whether these proposals might have a fundamental impact on universities and on the content of undergraduate courses. Could much of the first undergraduate year be needed to cover ground previously included in 'A level syllabuses? Could there be pressure for a fourth year in University degree courses in England and Wales, as there already is in Scotland where the broader system of Highers has for many years led on to 4-year degree courses. Although the report says that it sees no case for a general lengthening of undergraduate courses as a result of its proposals (paragraph 11.2), the analysis provided to reach this conclusion is sketchy. Significantly, the report approvingly quotes evidence suggesting that the consequence of its proposals may be the removal of the teaching of a research-orientated approach to physical sciences and engineering in the third year of undergraduate courses (para. 11.2). You may consider that it would be inappropriate for the Government to welcome this report until more work has been done on the implications of its recommendations for higher education.

Assessment

8. The report contains two novel recommendations on assessment which, while not central to the conclusions, may attract attention. First, it proposes a shift from written assessment at the end of an 'A' level course to a mixture of in-course assessment (accounting for 20% of the final marks) and greater emphasis on oral and practical assessment. Second, it proposes that 'A' level grades



should be supplemented on an exam certificate with information about different aspects of the candidate's performance in each subject. You may wish to consider whether these proposals would provide sufficient objectivity in assessment, or give rise to varying standards between schools. Presumably both proposals would need to be worked up considerably before their practicability could be fully assessed.

Resource Implications

9. The resource implications of the report's recommendations, both in terms of the teaching load on schools and if there is any question of extending undergraduate courses, could be considerable. The report itself recognises that there could be 'significant' in-service teacher training costs (para. 9.6). The paper says the Ministers recognise that the changes to 'A' levels should not proceed unless the costs of the implementation can be met within planned resources. The Economic Secretary, Treasury will be anxious for Mr Baker and Mr Walker to stick to that. He may also suggest that the further work needed on resource implications, if the proposals are to be pursued, should be undertaken within Government rather than by the School Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC). There are potential savings to be realised by reducing the 8 separate 'A' level examining boards to a smaller number; Mr Baker will however endorse the report's recommendation that, given the disruption this would cause, such rationalisation should be a relatively low priority.

Announcement and Further Work

10. The main decision for the meeting is whether Mr Baker should, as in his draft statement, announce that the Government 'endorses the Committee's recommendation for the general principles which should govern 'A' levels'. The draft statement also speaks enthusiastically of the proposed move to a 5-subject course. The question is whether such a statement should be made when, as Mr Baker himself acknowledges (paragraph 9 of his paper), some fundamental questions remain to be considered before the Government



can be certain that a 5-subject course would be practicable. You may want to explore the case for a more neutral statement, which leaves open the Government's options on the principles as well as the details of the report, and which tests public reaction to the proposals.

11. If it is agreed that the report's recommendations should be developed further, you will wish to ask Mr Baker for a timetable for future work. We understand he may suggest that implementation should be a little later than first examinations in 1994, given the various other radical changes currently being made to schools.

HANDLING

12. You will wish to ask the Secretary of State for Education and Science to open the discussion. The Secretary of State for Wales may wish to comment, as a joint author of the Note. The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Secretary of State for Employment may wish to comment on the desirability of broadening the curriculum for 16-18 year olds. The Secretary of State for Scotland may wish to compare the proposals with the system of Highers in Scotland. The Economic Secretary, Treasury may wish to comment on the resource implications.

R.T.J.

R T J WILSON
Cabinet Office
18 May 1988

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18 May 1988

'A' LEVELS : HIGGINSON REPORT

The Higginson Report is a curate's egg. Its affirmation of 'A' levels as important exams which need to be rigorous, stretching and stimulating is welcome.

Its criticism, however, of the high level of factual content in 'A' levels (reminiscent of the charge against GCE), and the need for the SEC/SEAC to develop (a) general principles to govern all 'A' level syllabuses; (b) principles specific to each subject and (c) assessment criteria by subject, shows the unhealthy influence which HMI has had on the Report.

Despite the vocabulary used by the Report in describing 'A' levels - 'rigour', 'breadth', 'depth', 'demanding', 'higher level skills' - its central recommendations, if implemented, would substantially change the face of 'A' levels as we know them today.

It would give enormous power to SEAC and effectively put HMI in the driving seat.

Major Recommendations

The report makes eight major recommendations:

1. 'A' levels to continue as single subject exams for high achievers.

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2. Assessment to involve more in-course evaluation.
3. 'A' level syllabuses to be leaner - slimmed from 8 periods to 6 periods per week.
4. More of the 'A' level timetable to be devoted to examinable studies.
5. Leaner subjects and more time for 'A' levels to enable most 6th form 'A' level students to take 5 subjects - a mixture of A and AS levels.
6. The SEC/SEAC to develop a) general principles - to govern all 'A' level syllabuses, b) subject-specific principles with a common core for each subject and c) assessment criteria subject by subject.
7. All syllabuses to be reviewed by SEC/SEAC against the principles above and the numbers of 'A' levels drastically reduced.
8. SEC/SEAC to approve GCE Boards' appeals procedures and to act as final court of appeal on procedural matters.

Criticisms of existing 'A' Levels

The Report starts by accepting a number of criticisms of existing 'A' levels:

- (a) the programmes of study are too narrow;
- (b) the system encourages premature specialisation;
- (c) candidates have to memorise too much information;

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(d) assessment is inadequate because it focuses on exams at the end of the course.

The report is convincing in arguing that our 'A' levels are narrow in coverage compared with countries such as Germany, France and the US and also in relation to the requirements of business. But the one criticism which is largely unsubstantiated is (c).

Throughout the Report there is a considerable criticism of acquiring facts e.g.

"Each subject syllabus should focus more sharply on making sense of the facts it means removing altogether the temporary committal to memory of inessential and inconsequential information. (3.9)

"Paring away the padding would reduce the factual content of each syllabus". (3.10)

"Candidates (are) overburdened with having to memorise a large amount of information". (1.3)

"There is a need for leaner syllabuses in which the proportion of factual content has been reduced". (5.2)

This criticism of 'A' levels by the Report is identical to the previous criticism of GCE, which in turn led to GCSE. In history for example this approach has meant ignoring factual knowledge of of British and world history and concentrating on historical skills (e.g. analysis of documents etc).

In my judgement this is a thoroughly invalid criticism. Recently I have spent considerable time (for personal reasons) reviewing 'A' levels in economics, politics and

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geography. While each course could be reduced if the topics covered were reduced, it would be quite wrong to confuse such a reduction, with a reduction in the factual content of each course.

It is impossible to study subjects such as history, politics and economics without having acquired a substantial factual knowledge of how the real world works or the facts of history. Nothing is worse in subjects like economics and history than theory without facts. It is an immediate return to the nineteen sixties!

Proposals for changing 'A' levels

The major proposals the Report makes are to:

- (a) reduce the factual content in 'A' levels - this enables a subject to be taught in 6 periods not 8 periods per week;
- (b) reduce teaching on general studies subjects in the 6th form;
- (c) increase the number of AS level subjects;
- (d) submit the syllabuses and assessment to evaluation by SEAC.

It is important to resist reducing the proportion of factual content in existing 'A' level courses. Courses could be reduced by covering less subjects but not by reducing their factual content. If existing courses are truncated this would leave room for greater breadth through AS level subjects. But it is crucially different from the approach proposed by Higginson.

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It is equally important to resist the proposal that A level syllabuses and assessment should be evaluated by SEAC. SEAC may easily be taken over by HMI - in the way HMI have already captured the SEC and SCDC.

Apart from the issue of breadth, 'A' levels at present are working extremely well. There is no case whatever for their being tampered with by HMI. This argument can be presented in one of two ways:

either one can attack the issue directly by showing how the Higginson proposals would effectively reduce standards

or one can attack the issue indirectly, by arguing that because of the many changes taking place at present in schools it would be unwise to ask teachers to take on another major upheaval.

Conclusions

The Higginson Report looks superficially to be very helpful. This is deceptive. If implemented it would constitute a Trojan horse bringing in a new progressive approach to 'A' levels - the one area up until now which has escaped the clutches of the educational establishment.

Recommendations

1. Accept the case for greater breadth in 'A' levels e.g. a student doing English History and Geography might take an AS level in computing; or one studying Maths, Physics and Chemistry could do an AS level in a foreign language.

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2. Ensure that the present nature of 'A' levels is in no way changed except that the number of topics covered in each subject might be reduced.
3. Reject the need for any review of syllabuses or assessment by SEC/SEAC.
4. Ensure that the examining bodies retain their independence - which is their only source of strength - and are not subject to SEAC.
5. The Secretary of state should give a very guarded welcome to the Report.

Brian Griffiths

BRIAN GRIFFITHS

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18 May 1988

Higginson - A Levels

The personal letter from Kenneth Baker represents second thoughts following a major disagreement in DES earlier this week between himself and Angela Rumbold and Bob Dunn. Both are very opposed to implementing the Higginson Report.

Kenneth Baker's further reflections are excellent and allow greater breadth and flexibility in 'A' level while making no concessions to HMI.

Recommendation

Accept immediately!

Brian Griffiths

BRIAN GRIFFITHS

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HIGGINSON - A-LEVELS

I hope that the discussion about A-Levels at E(EP) may be in the nature of a Second Reading Debate - similar to the one we had recently on housing. I expect colleagues on such an important matter will be able to contribute more than just a Departmental brief.

In particular I have been reflecting further about our attitude to A-levels and I do have some concerns which I will be expressing:

- i. Any education system can only absorb so much change and this is particularly true of the examination system. Our first priority must be to get the GCSE properly established. This is going to take a good deal of bedding down over the next two or three years with a regular review of the syllabuses. This will have to be undertaken by SEAC and by the examining boards. Moreover, the next new task for SEAC must be to get the assessment and examination system at 7, 11, 14 and 16 established. This may also involve the examining boards. Therefore I think that to ask SEAC and the examining boards to review all the A-Level syllabuses, which is what a narrowing of each subject would involve, is something that we really cannot undertake in the next 4 or 5 years.

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- ii. Although I am anxious to broaden the post-16 A-Level exam, I think to talk in terms of a 5 A-Level programme could actually deter many young people. To some youngsters, 1 A-Level is a mountain, 3 is a distant Himalayan range. On the other hand, they may be able to cope with 2 or even 3 A/S Levels. This leads me to conclude that the way forward in order to broaden the post-16 approach to education is to concentrate, in the next few years, on developing and expanding A/S Levels. This means giving A/S better status and possibly rating them rather more than 0.5 of an A-Level, may be 0.6. This will give a clear indication that we will be looking to mixtures of, say, 2 A-Levels with 2 A/S Levels; or 1 A-Level and 4 A/Ss.
- iii. We have also got to consider those young people who currently do not take A-Levels and who take the various other qualifications i.e. BTEC and City & Guilds. We are now looking into all of this in the NCVQ. A lot of work is still to be done on the inter-action between the work of the NCVQ and the development of more formal A-Level education. Clearly the boundaries will overlap - there will not be such distinct routes for individual students in the future.
- iv. We are going to have to publish Higginson. The education world knows we have received it; employers are interested; so are the universities. There is a very strong lobby in favour of a broadening of post-16 education. I think we should publish the report with strong support for a broadening, though decisions about how it is achieved and actual implementation should be postponed. We must make it
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clear too that if and when we implement the report, that will be our decision and not the decision of SEAC. In the meantime, I will want to promote A/S Levels very strongly and to concentrate the efforts of GCE Boards on developing good A/S Level syllabuses.

WS

K B

Department of Education and Science

18 May 1988