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3

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

The Rt Hon The Lord Home of the Hirsell KT  
The Hirsell  
Coldstream  
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*Dear Alec,*

I thought you would find it interesting to know where we stand on the place of Christianity in religious education and collective worship in the Education Reform Bill. This follows the letter you recently sent me and our word in the House of Lords.

You will be glad to know that there has now been a significant shift by the Church of England. I do not think they would have moved at all if it had not been for the pressure of the campaign that Caroline Cox and Michael Allison mounted.

As you know, the Bill strengthens the position of religious education in the curriculum. Religious education now stands alongside the foundation and core subjects as part of the basic curriculum and is in effect 'primus inter pares'. The Bill also strengthens the local arrangements for implementing agreed syllabuses for religious education, in particular by requiring all local authorities to establish local Standing Advisory Councils for religious education (SACRES) with a remit to oversee implementation. That is what was secured at the Committee Stage. In the debates in the Lords, it became clear that this was not seen as sufficient to arrest the decline of effective Christian religious education in our schools over recent years. Clearly a stronger commitment to the Christian element of religious education was needed. The Bishops, and the Bishop of London, were very opposed to this - as indeed were the Catholic Church. At one stage they were prepared to vote against it had a vote been pressed in the House of Lords. This position would simply have not been understood by the people of our country.

Following this, I made it clear to the Bishop of London that changes were needed at Report Stage to meet the very real concerns that had been expressed by many members, including yourself. Since then the Bishop has been able to formulate his views more clearly and also discuss them, at considerable

length, with the Catholic, Free and Methodist Churches, the Muslims and the Jews. He is now proposing to table three amendments which will bring Christianity on to the face of the Bill, affecting religious education, the composition of the other denominations committee of SACRE, and collective worship.

Last Wednesday, the Bishop came to see me and showed me his amendments which I saw for the first time. I attach a copy of these. The first amendment on religious education gives a very clear statement of what locally agreed syllabuses must reflect - namely that religious traditions in Britain are mainly Christian. It comes very close to Caroline Cox's original idea of a requirement that syllabuses should be "predominantly" Christian - incidentally she no longer wishes to use the word "predominantly".

The second amendment ensures that the Committee that represents the other religious denominations on the SACREs and the conferences which determine the syllabus should include Christian as well as other religious denominations. This means the Catholics, the Methodists and the Free Churches will be represented on the Committee as well as the Sikhs, the Muslims and the Jews. This formulation, incidentally, will not include Humanists and agnostics on committees, as is sometimes the case now.

The third change reflects the content of collective worship. The Bishop said that he had considerable difficulty with the phrase "Christian collective worship" because of the way other Christian denominations in our country interpreted the phrase. The phrase that he uses now clearly means that the collective worship shall reflect the broad traditions of Christian belief. This includes not just the New Testament but also those elements of the Old Testament which constitute part of the Christian tradition.

In addition, following commitments which Gloria Hooper gave in Committee, the Government will be tabling further amendments agreed with the Churches. This will ensure that the complaints machinery in Clause 18 of the Bill applies to provision of collective worship and also to the establishment of SACREs. The complaints procedure already applies to religious education. Taken together with what the Bishop of London has proposed, and what has already been agreed in Committee, these amendments will further strengthen the local arrangements to ensure effective implementation of what we want to secure.

When the Bishop saw me on Wednesday he told me that he had secured the support of the Catholic Church for these amendments. Miles Norfolk was intending to put his name to them when they were tabled. He also said that he had got the support of the Methodists, and the other Free Churches. They had been particularly difficult to bring along to agreement. The Bishop mentioned he had received the support of the Association of Christian Teachers, and Christians in Education - the evangelical group of teachers.

Monday the Bishop is putting these amendments to his own Church of England Board of Education and he is confident that they will have the support of all the Anglican Bishops. That will emerge more on Monday.

He said he had also spoken to the Chief Rabbi who supports these amendments. I think you should know, however, that some of the other Rabbis representing other elements of the Jewish faith think that they go too far. They feel they could be interpreted as making the other faiths second class, particularly in relation to collective worship. However, the Bishop is seeing the Chief Rabbi about this and is obviously keen to secure his explicit support for these amendments.

I also met Caroline Cox, Peter Thorneycroft, David Renton and John Boyd-Carpenter after my meeting with the Bishop. I had been asked by the Bishop not to show the full text of these amendments so I had to paraphrase them as well as I could. I have subsequently asked the Bishop to allow me to divulge his amendments as they will, in any event, be tabled by next Wednesday or Thursday. Since then I have arranged to meet Caroline and Michael on Monday afternoon, when I shall show them the Amendments.

Caroline showed me, for the first time, the latest amendments which she has formulated to table. I must say I find very considerable difficulties with these. I do not know if you have seen copies of them but in effect they would abandon the idea of collective worship and go for separate worship for different faiths. I think this would be very divisive in the schools. They also have, as they are presently drafted, the quite unacceptable position of positively encouraging the leaders of the other faiths - namely the Rabbis and the Imams - to come in and give religious instruction in our schools. At the moment the instruction of the Muslim faith, for example, takes place after school hours and at weekends. I really would not want a situation which, by statute, allows and encourages such religious leaders to give lessons in our schools.

In relation to religious education, they would also establish in statute that, where no suitably qualified or willing teachers were available to teach Christian religious education, the school would have discretion not to provide religious education at all. I fear that in some areas the consequence would be that some schools would indeed abandon religious education altogether. That is not a situation that I could possibly accept. Finally, the right of parental withdrawal is elevated to the point where it is likely that large numbers of children will look to separate provision if this in practice can be organised and will not be exposed to Christian religion and beliefs.

I would very much hope that when I have been able to discuss the actual amendments, as drafted by the Church of England, with Caroline she will be able to see the very considerable victory which she has won. Her campaign has ensured that the basic elements of Christianity are made available both in collective worship and in religious education in our schools.

I think there has been tremendous progress in this area over the last two months. I particularly remember one point the Bishop London made to me. He said the whole process of consultation, which all the Churches have engaged in, has had the effect of making them realise the responsibilities they have and which they must fulfil in the future. This has been the real trouble. The Churches have let a lot of matters drift away. This will not be possible as a result of the changes we are now bringing in and which they are committed to making work in practice. I think at a practical level this is one of the most important results of the whole process.

I would of course be very happy to come and discuss this with you at any time before the debate, which will be on June 21st. I do very much hope that when you have seen these amendments you will be able to show your own strong, personal support for them.

Yours ever

Kenneth

EDUCATION REFORM BILL: Bishops of London's proposed amendments.

SACRE and Conference Amendments

1. Sub-section (4)(a) of the new SACRE clause (Clause 7) now to read:

"such Christian and other religious denominations, as in the opinion of the authority, will appropriately reflect the principle religious traditions in the area, to be represented;"

2. A similar amendment to Schedule 5 of the 1944 Act - affecting the Conferences which devise agreed syllabuses.

Religious education amendment

3. Sub-section (8) of new SACRE clause to have added to it:

"8(B) Any new agreed syllabus for religious education shall reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Britain."

Collective worship amendments

4. Sub-section (2) of the new SACRE clause (Clause 7) to have added to it:

"and the application of section 97 (2) in relation to individual schools"

5. Clause 97 ("Collective worship") to have added to it:

"(2) Collective worship in county schools shall in the main reflect the broad traditions of Christian belief in ways appropriate to the age, aptitude and family background of the pupils involved."