

PRIME MINISTER

6 July 1988

Scottish Education Bill

Malcolm Rifkind's note sets out his intentions for the Scottish Education Reform Bill for the next session. He proposes two key issues for the Bill: negotiation of teachers pay and dismissal of teachers. While these may need to be tackled, the really crucial issues of current debate in Scotland are tucked away in the penultimate paragraph (13) under Other Matters, namely opting-out and testing.

By fudging these issues, we miss a crucial opportunity to extend 'Thatcherism' to Scotland. Malcolm Rifkind will doubtless argue tomorrow that these are subjects for another occasion and that opting-out might be better discussed with you privately. This would really be a great shame: and it is far better to raise the issue with colleagues and test the water.

Opting-Out

It would be quite easy for the Secretary of State to introduce opting-out for Scottish schools, if he so wished. All he has to do is to introduce clauses 37-80 of the Education Reform Bill for England and Wales and fit them into his own Bill.

His reason for not doing so is that he is not convinced there is a sufficient demand for opting-out in Scotland. He uses two arguments. First, that he has not received a sufficient number letters from parents in different schools demanding the right to opt-out: and second, that the Roman Catholic Church and in particular, Archbishop Thomas Winning of Glasgow, while originally showing some interest, have now apparently decided against opting-out.

Neither of these arguments is convincing. The Roman Catholic Church is known to be very close to the Labour Party especially in the West of Scotland. It would have been a major rupture in their relationship if they were seen to oppose Strathclyde Regional Council on this issue. In addition, the Catholic Bishops in England and Wales have opposed opting-out in the Bill; for the Scottish hierarchy to support opting-out would therefore be seen as breaking ranks within the church.

On the other issue it is true that the Secretary of State has not received a large number of letters demanding opting-out. (Neither incidentally did Kenneth Baker last year) It is also true however that the Scottish Educational establishment (the regional councils, EIS, educational research initiatives and the Scottish Office) have been opposed to opting-out.

The evidence for there being a demand for opting-out is as follows:

- (a) parents in Paisley Grammar School, Our Lady and St Francis - the two schools you saved - have expressed a clear preference to consider opting-out as a serious possibility;
- (b) parents from another school in Paisley - Stanley Green - have also expressed a desire to opt-out. I enclose a

cutting from the Scottish Daily Express which shows how these parents have changed (Annex A);

- (c) on my recent visit to Scotland I met nine parent leaders from three schools. In reporting to you on this visit this is what I said:

"(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 have 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.

"(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."

(d) the Scotsman recently conducted an opinion poll on opting-out in Scotland: the result showed 30% of the electorate in favour. This was a great surprise to many politicians - higher than the number of people saying they will vote Conservative!

Testing

The other contentious but crucial issue on which the Secretary of State says very little in his note is the provision of a statutory basis for national testing at ages 7 and 11.

Last November the Secretary of State issued a consultation document which proposed introducing a national testing system. The response from the Education establishment was hostile - precisely the same as in England and Wales.

The Scotsman has once again helped us: it conducted a poll and the result was that 45% of people were in favour of introducing a statutory based national testing system.

Once again the result is very similar to England and Wales: the professionals are deeply opposed to our policy but a significant number of the electorate are in favour of it.

Recommendation

The evidence of popular support for opting-out and testing is sufficiently strong to warrant introducing them into the Bill. In any case opting-out is not mandatory but voluntary.

Invite the Secretary of State to prepare legislation on these issues.

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Parent power boost for schools

SCOTTISH schools are to be given the opportunity to opt-out of local authority control from next year.

The Government is under pressure from parents throughout Scotland—particularly Strathclyde—to pass the legislation in the next Parliament.

And among the considerations are for four schools in Paisley to opt-out as a block, which will set the bandwagon rolling.

The crucial date is July 15, when Stanely Green school in Paisley is before the Court of Appeal.

Last month the school was saved from closure by the intervention of the Judge, who said that it could not be axed when so

EXCLUSIVE BY GEORGE BIRRELL

many parents were in favour of it remaining open.

Labour-controlled Strathclyde has appealed against the judgment, and party leaders have claimed that if it is overturned—as is widely predicted by legal experts—the school will shut.

Several hundred parents have now written to Education Minister Michael Forsyth, urging him to act to save the school.

Letters have also been sent from parents with children at Paisley Grammar—recently saved by the intervention

of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Scots Secretary Malcolm Rifkind—and Castlehead and Camphill schools, also in Paisley.

Talks have taken place between parent leaders at all four schools, and a joint approach could be made to Mr. Forsyth.

Structure

Another school which may elect to opt-out would be Our Lady and St Francis in Glasgow, which Strathclyde also wants to close against parents' wishes.

Mr. Forsyth is known to favour opting out, which

will become a real possibility once the school boards legislation is passed this summer.

Professor Tony Dickson, chairman of the Stanely Green parents' action group, said: "A few months ago very few would have been in favour of opting out. Now I would suspect it is as high as 90 per cent."

Under the scheme, schools would be run by parents and given the finance—more than £1 million a year for secondaries—direct from the Exchequer.

The cash would be lopped off local authorities' rate support grant.