

SUBJECT
MASTER

Filed on:



10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

file

h/rabbi as

bc JHolroyd

From the Appointments Secretary

28 June 1994

Jonathan Sachs.

**PRIME MINISTER'S DISCUSSION WITH THE CHIEF RABBI,
14 JUNE**

As the Prime Minister has already mentioned to the Home Secretary, he and the Chief Rabbi met on 14 June in one of the Prime Minister's regular encounters with religious leaders. The discussion was enjoyed by both parties.

The Prime Minister opened by talking of the need to resume the debate which he had sought to get going within the theme of Back to Basics. The Chief Rabbi said that in his view the moment for a renewed debate of this sort would reappear, since people were becoming ready for it, though possibly not just yet. Timing would, however, be of critical importance and the ground would need to be very well prepared.

His own analysis was that social and political attitudes go in cycles. The late 1950s had been a time of disillusion. After the relief and relaxation with the ending of the war new problems had arisen and new solutions had not been easily forthcoming. However, in the 1960s, Harold Wilson had hit a number of sympathetic chords with his stress on the role of the state as provider and the importance of scientific advance (also state-inspired) as a stimulant in modernising society. Cynicism again predominated in the 1970s, when it was clear that the state could not do all that it was claimed to do and often did things worse. This disillusion was followed by the search for a new vision, which in the event became Mrs. Thatcher's vision of the primary place of the individual, with the steady reduction in government and handing back to the citizen increased scope for choice and responsibility. This has led in the 1980s to over-emphasis on the rights, as opposed to the duties, of the individual. As a result in the 1990s we were in the position of believing in the absolute virtue neither of the state nor of the individual and as yet with no middle way in sight. In the Chief Rabbi's view, the present mood of disenchantment is predictable and has little to do with government. It is shared in many different countries with quite different governments.

The Chief Rabbi's prediction was that the next great concept would be that of "the third sector mid-way between the state and the individual". This would take the form of "little platoons" which in their own area of interest and own community were powerful in bringing together people to work for the common good and thus to establish key concepts in society, such as the family, civic duty and responsibility.

One important role for Government would be to encourage this activity and give it a framework. It was particularly important to time initiatives correctly and to "get the rhetoric right", by which the Chief Rabbi meant the right language and tone. The language must be visionary, forward-looking and positive: it must not suggest that the past can be recovered. It must address widely-felt anxieties and must chart a cogent route beyond them which would provide a translation of the philosophic themes into practice.

The Chief Rabbi said that not much new thinking about this area had been published in Britain. Some valuable books were beginning to appear in the USA: in particular Michael Novak's *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, James Q. Wilson's *The Moral Sense*; Robert Bellah's *The Good Society*; Charles Murray's *In Pursuit of Happiness*; and Amitai Etzioni's *The Spirit of Community*. The one book of this sort that had received attention in Britain was Osborne and Gaebler's *Reinventing Government*. The Chief Rabbi had also sought to cover some of the same ground in his Reith Lectures on *Religion, Morality and Society in a Secular Age*. We shall be getting hold of these books.

The Prime Minister and the Chief Rabbi also talked about the value to society of the continued willingness of many people to give liberally their time and resources to assisting others and about the need to encourage this. The Chief Rabbi argued that there would be considerable advantage in getting together a group of national figures with an interest in this area to elaborate a national approach. Sir Harry Djanogly, Sir Harry Solomon and Professor Charles Handy were mentioned as possibles. They should be charged with constructing a national campaign to encourage the formation and growth of charities and voluntary organisations. Particular emphasis should be placed on local groups, meeting real and local needs. The Chief Rabbi suggested that such a campaign might include a new Awards Scheme for work in the voluntary sector and perhaps some system for matching funds to stimulate action. These ideas would match the general philosophic ideas that he had set out earlier in the discussion and the launch of a fresh national initiative should coincide with the launch of the wider political debate.

The Prime Minister drew attention to the work set in hand by the Government at national level this year to encourage voluntary activity, e.g. under the Make a Difference initiative, but said that he valued the Chief Rabbi's thinking and would want to follow through these ideas with those concerned in Government and see what more should be done. (At one point the Prime Minister suggested that in due course it might be worth getting together a small group of people who were thinking authoratively in this general area to Chequers for a day's seminar as a contribution to restarting the debate that had been begun by Back to Basics.)

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister would be grateful for any comments that the Home Secretary may have on the general issues and would like to be kept informed of progress in setting up the advisory group of voluntary activity in connection with the *Make a Difference* initiative.

JOHN HOLROYD

Miss Joan MacNaughton,
Home Office.