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From the Private Secretary

Dear William

PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH LADY PLATT
MONDAY 16 JUNE

The Prime Minister met Lady Platt, Chairman of the Equal Opportunities Commission, today for a general discussion about equal opportunities. A number of specific points were covered:

- (i) Lady Platt confirmed that there were now two WISE buses in operation. The EOC hoped to arrange for more buses for the future. They were proving highly effective. It was certainly important to continue to encourage girls to familiarise themselves with computers and new technology generally. Lady Platt believed one way of doing this was to tackle this initially in single sex classes (to avoid the boys crowding them out), and for the content of the programmes to be made as relevant as possible to girls.
- (ii) Lady Platt said she was glad that the proposals to remove the exemption allowing women's colleges at Oxford and Cambridge to admit only women tutors had been dropped. The Prime Minister said it would be nonsensical to consider removing that exemption at this stage. One of the problems was that men's colleges were not taking on enough women themselves.
- (iii) Lady Platt believed that the proposal to raise the threshold for part-time workers from 16 to 20 hours a week before they could qualify under the unfair dismissal legislation was a retrograde step. She would be taking it up with the Secretary of State for Employment. Many part-time workers were women, and it was vital that the Government was seen to give women as much encouragement as possible in the employment field. The Prime Minister said that the availability of part-time work was indeed vital for women and employers should be given every encouragement to make it available. It must not be priced or regulated out of the market.
- (iv) The Prime Minister said she remained very keen to

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ensure that women were properly represented on public bodies, and she continued to take a close interest in these appointments. Lady Platt agreed to provide the Prime Minister with a list of suitable women who might be considered for such appointments in the future. The Prime Minister noted that one of the difficulties was that, particularly in business, young women frequently do not wish to leave a company, which they may have built up single-handed, to take on the work involved in a public appointment.

- (v) On the Green Paper on personal taxation, the Prime Minister noted that it was important for the present inequitable arrangements to be changed. But a system of fully transferable allowances could discourage women from returning to work after having children. Lady Platt suggested one way out of this difficulty might be to provide for the allowances to become transferable only when the couple concerned reached 50. In the meantime, the money available could be used to increase child benefit, and paid directly to the mother. The Prime Minister said that it was very difficult to see how a dual system of that kind could work effectively, and noted that child benefit was an expensive and inefficient way of directing help to those in need.
- (vi) Lady Platt said she hoped it could be arranged that the new family credit would not go through the pay packet but would be paid to the individual parent concerned. The Prime Minister said she was aware of the concerns which had been expressed. But it had to be recognised that the proposal not to pay the credit through the pay packet threatened the *raison d'être* for the change in policy in the first place.

Lady Platt, at the end of the discussion, said that she was grateful to the Prime Minister for giving her the opportunity to talk these matters over. It had been a most useful meeting. She hoped the Government would continue to develop policies which would give maximum encouragement to women to pursue their own careers, and in particular to counter any impression that part-time work, in which women were so often involved, was second class. There were exciting initiatives underway, for instance the "Career Break" schemes of the Engineering Council. There was much more to be done, however, and the Prime Minister herself was in a strong position to give a lead.

The Prime Minister said she was grateful to Lady Platt for explaining her current concerns, and hoped that they could continue to meet together for similar discussions from time to time. The position of women, particularly working women, needed to be better understood in Government generally. More women should be encouraged to take up science and business careers. But there was a balance to be struck, and

it was not always an easy one. Too much regulation would stifle the very jobs which women were seeking. The Prime Minister confirmed she would continue to take a close interest in these matters, and she thanked Lady Platt for her enormously useful work as Chairman of the Commission.

The Prime Minister and Lady Platt also discussed briefly a number of political matters, which are being followed up separately by Stephen Sherbourne, who also attended the meeting.

I am copying this record to John Turner (Department of Employment), Tony Laurance (Department of Health and Social Security) and Rachel Lomax (H.M. Treasury).

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