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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

12 March 1985

The Prime Minister today met Baroness Cox, Professor Arthur Pollard and Dr. John Marks, together with your Secretary of State. Oliver Letwin also attended.

Baroness Cox explained that she and her colleagues were concerned that the Government should now be taking some radical initiatives in the education field, which would be both fully in line with Conservative philosophy and have much popular appeal. Baroness Cox identified five suggestions which she and her colleagues wished to put to the Prime Minister.

First, Baroness Cox believed that, within the State system, some schools should develop a role as centres of excellence. Their field of specialisation need not be narrowly restricted, but might encompass anything from mathematics to physical education, depending on what was appropriate for the school in question. A similar idea had been tried in the United States, with their "magnet" schools, and was proving very successful. Voluntary aided schools here might be particularly suitable for development in this way; they were currently being squeezed as local authorities sought to fill up the maintained schools at their expense. The Prime Minister was sympathetic to the idea of developing centres of excellence. Every child should have a good basic general education though there was no reason why this should not be combined with specialisation too. Baroness Cox's proposal however needed to be thought through carefully. Sir Keith Joseph agreed to discuss it further with her and her colleagues.

Baroness Cox's second concern was that guidance should be issued by Sir Keith to inhibit the intrusion of political propaganda into schools. Many schools would welcome guidelines on how controversial material like this should be tackled. Some of the documentation produced by ILEA and sent to all schools (examples of which Baroness Cox passed to the Prime Minister) was blatant political propaganda,

particularly that relating to peace issues. There were examples too of schools setting up "anti racist" and "anti sexist" events, and parents were often deterred from complaining because of their worry that the teachers would take it out on the child. The Prime Minister sympathised with Baroness Cox's concern, though the intellectual resilience of pupils should not be underestimated, and, in the right context, proper discussion of all points of view within schools was the healthiest approach. The problem was that the propagandists were intent on destroying the basic social values on which constructive discussion depended. Sir Keith's need was to get sound evidence of examples of teachers attempting to politicise pupils, and the information provided by Baroness Cox and her colleagues was helpful. He said he would be happy to consider further with them the possibility of converting his recent speech on this subject into guidance of the kind suggested.

Baroness Cox's third concern was that sensible views on education should be more effectively represented, particularly through the Party and in Parliament. One step would be to arrange a meeting with the backbench Education Committee, and Sir Keith Joseph agreed to take this forward. He also said he would look at the representativeness of the Secondary Examinations Council.

Baroness Cox's fourth concern related to the overall structure of higher education, particularly in London. The university had been severely disrupted recently because of reorganisations, and London's eight polytechnics seemed to be doing well at the university's expense. The North London Polytechnic was a continuing problem, despite the inquiry currently under way. The sensible way forward was to look at the structure of higher education across the board. The Prime Minister believed the best route was to take the polytechnics out of ILEA's area of responsibility. Sir Keith noted the difficulties with this course, and legislation would of course be needed. He would consider it further, but it would be sensible to await the report of the NLP inquiry.

Finally, Baroness Cox referred to her continuing concern that membership of student unions should be voluntary. She recognised that many important functions were undertaken by the students union. But fact was that of the £200,000 of public money the NLP received in this way only a small sum was being spent on non-political purposes. It was unacceptable that ordinary students should have to spend so much of their time in meetings arguing against the extremists merely to ensure that the money was properly spent. Sir Keith Joseph had a lot of sympathy for this view, and had tried to find a solution. The problem was that union membership was automatic rather than compulsory.

Primary legislation would be needed and this could only be justified if the abuse really was significant; in that context the report of the NLP's expenditure was most important and would be followed up. The Prime Minister strongly sympathised with Baroness Cox's concern. The way to ensure money was not spent on the wrong things was to increase the power and influence of the ordinary student. With universities now receiving a lump sum direct from the UGC in respect of some functions previously funded via the individual student grant, the way seemed to have been paved for reform of the kind suggested. It wasn't clear that the amount of money being misused mattered as much as the principle at stake.

Concluding the meeting, the Prime Minister thanked Baroness Cox and her colleagues for raising matters of such importance to the country as a whole. Sir Keith Joseph would arrange to discuss them further.

(Mark Addison)

Miss Elizabeth Hodkinson,
Department of Education and Science.