

PRIME MINISTER

29 January 1988

Paisley Grammar School

The government's decision to back parental choice in Scotland is creating an enormous stir.

It is a daily item in the newspapers. The Glasgow Herald and the Scotsman have come out strongly against it. But the Daily Record - a Labour paper - has come out in favour of it. Peter McCann, the former Labour Lord Provost of Glasgow, has called it "an act of strong government" and supports it. The parents have been described as "over the moon" about it. It has also been popular with members of the RC church as it has saved one and possibly two of their excellent schools.

For once the Tories in Scotland are seen to be backing a popular issue!

Recommendations

- (1) It is important that the campaign does not stop here. The head of the parents organisation at the school has already said that they would like the school to opt-out from Strathclyde Education Committee.

This is something for which there must be considerable support in other cities. It would be folly for us not to back opting-out - even though it will certainly invoke the wrath of local councils, and one suspects, the Scottish Office.

(2) 1988 is the 500th anniversary of Paisley.

If in the next six months you visit Glasgow, Paisley would almost certainly be worth a visit. I suspect you will be greeted by many grateful parents.

Brian Griffiths

BRIAN GRIFFITHS

28 JAN 1988

Turmoil as Rifkind given sweeping power over closures

Schools: Thatcher steps in

By EWEN MacASKILL, Political Correspondent

MRS THATCHER was at the centre of a major row yesterday after she intervened directly in the controversy over the threatened closure of Paisley Grammar School.

Her surprising decision to step into the conflict between the Scottish Office and Strathclyde Regional Council over the school brought a complete change in the regulations governing closures for the whole of Scotland which could throw local authority education planning into turmoil.

The Scottish Secretary, Mr Malcolm Rifkind, announced yesterday that local authorities will no longer have a free hand over closures. Any proposal to close a school, or to change the nature of it, will have to be submitted to the Scottish Secretary for consent, if the present pupil population is 80 per cent or more of the school's capacity.

Paisley Grammar is now almost certain to be saved. The Scottish Office moved with speed on the regulations, which became effective immediately, because it feared Strathclyde

would soon make a decision on the school and the powers could not be retrospective.

Opposition MPs were angry that Mrs Thatcher, who they claimed handed the decision down to the Scottish Office, had usurped the power of local authorities. They complained that the Prime Minister, who has written personally to the head of Paisley Grammar, had made regulations for the whole of Scotland on the basis of one school.

The Shadow Scottish Secretary, Mr Donald Dewar, described the decision as arbitrary and a remarkable exercise in opportunism. The Liberals' Scottish spokesman, Mr Archy Kirkwood, accused the Tories of taking a political sledgehammer to the problem.

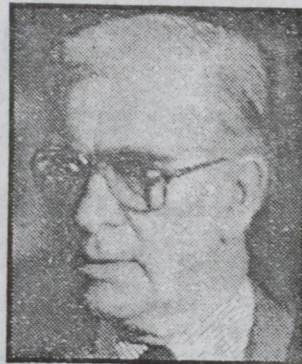
The local MP, Mr Norman Buchan (Lab, Paisley South), wanted to know what would happen to the other schools in Paisley that faced closure now that Paisley Grammar had apparently been singled out by the Prime Minister for reprieve.



Mrs Thatcher — a 'school attractive to parents should not be closed.'

In a letter to the rector of Paisley Grammar, Mr Robert Corbett, Mrs Thatcher said she was very concerned about the proposal to close it. Existing law placed a duty on both the Scottish Secretary and local authorities to ensure that pupils were educated in accordance with the wishes of the parents, if that was consistent with reasonable public expenditure, she said.

"I am, therefore, surprised



Headmaster Robert Corbett — his plea won Downing Street intervention.

that there should be a proposal to close a school which is obviously highly attractive to parents and which is full to capacity even at a time when school rolls generally are falling," she said.

"In such cases, the Secretary of State should be able to review the authority's proposals and to ensure that the interests of parents are being fully taken into account."

Mrs Thatcher, who had

representations on the issue from Mr Corbett, Mr Allan Stewart (C, Eastwood), and district councillors, said Paisley Grammar came well within the scope of the new regulations. "I hope that you and the parents and pupils of Paisley Grammar will accept my warm wishes for the future of the school."

It is remarkable for a Prime Minister to become involved in a local dispute but the decision is in line with the present Conservative philosophy that parents should have more say in the running of schools.

Mr Rifkind, echoing the Prime Minister, said he recognised the difficult decisions Strathclyde and other local authorities had in rationalising school provision so as to reduce surplus capacity but he was concerned that the options being considered included the closure of schools so highly regarded by parents.

Mr Dewar said: "Legislation for one special case is a very dangerous habit. Ministers will bask in the instant popularity, but it must be noted that the new powers apply to every other case."

He added that that kind of selective action made it very difficult to find a solution that took account of all the schools and pupils in the Paisley area.

Alan Forbes writes The Prime Minister's intervention delighted pupils, parents and staff of Paisley Grammar School but stunned the Labour leaders of Strathclyde Regional Council, who now face a new crisis in their school rationalisation programme.

No-one in the council doubts that the school has been saved because the Scottish Secretary, Mr Malcolm Rifkind, is unlikely to misread the "warm wishes" that Mrs Thatcher sent to the school in her letter to the rector. The 80 per cent regulation has also, it appears, saved Notre Dame High School for Girls in the West End of Glasgow, and Our Lady and St Francis girls' secondary in the East End. But St Aelred's Secondary in Paisley may have missed the 80 per cent mark by only five or six pupils.

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The biggest problem for the council is the threat that they say the regulation will pose to Merksworth Secondary High School in Paisley. Merksworth, according to Strathclyde Education Department, has the best building and sports facilities in Renfrewshire but there are only 348 pupils for a 1,187 capacity.

If Strathclyde's plans to move Paisley Grammar to Merksworth had gone ahead, there was a strong possibility that the newer school would have been renamed as Paisley Grammar School. The council's leader, Councillor Charles Gray, who was angered by the announcement, said the Grammar's ethos was movable but that was strongly disputed by Mr Corbett. "Ethos is a very intangible thing and we are talking about a whole lot of things that Charles Gray dismisses in general. I don't think it is anything that you can transplant," he added.

Mr Corbett and a parents' leader, Mr Alasdair Campbell, said that retention of Paisley need not mean closure of Merksworth. But Councillor Gray said: "As a result of gross, serious and sinister interference, the Government has made it much more difficult for us to try to make savings to improve education for every child in Paisley and throughout the region. Yet here is a Government that penalises us unfairly if we overspend."

Councillor Gray said that the Scottish education Minister, Mr Michael Forsyth was a "wimp who has run clyping to the Prime Minister on matters that only concern the Scottish Secretary."

Councillor Gray said he was disturbed that the Prime Minister had intervened in Scottish affairs in such a way. "Apparently the regulation came into effect as soon as it was announced, and I haven't even had a chance to read it. Our education committee still has to decide on closures and after that there is a 28-week consultation period," he added.

Mr Michael Forsyth's visit to Paisley Grammar School convinced Councillor Gray that the school was becoming a Government cause celebre which has now led directly to the 80 per cent regulation. Until now the Scottish Secretary has had to decide only on closures proposed for remote rural schools or where Roman Catholic schools might have had to merge with non-denominational schools. This morning, Councillor Gray will meet education and finance officials to discuss what can be done now about Paisley, but in the meantime celebrations continue in the town.

SCOTSMAN

28 JAN 1988

Hebridean closures 9

AFTER the longest meeting of the education committee of the Western Isles Council, it has been decided to close two schools in Lewis and one in Harris. A total of 15 schools in the Western Isles are now scheduled for closure, the 12 others being on Uist and Barra.

The nine-hour meeting was dealing with possible school closures as well as looking at cuts in next year's revenue estimates.

The committee also recommended that statutory talks take place regarding the closure of the Lewis primary

school at Achmore and one secondary department at Uig with effect from June 1990. Fidigarry School, however, was given a reprieve. It will be retained as a first line primary community school.

In Harris, Leverburgh secondary department will close but the primary school at Manish and Scalpay secondary department escaped the axe.

The committee also decided to cut £386,000 from next year's budget as part of the policy and resources committee decision to make cuts totalling £650,000.

SCOTSMAN

28 JAN 1988

Pressure kept up to save Newbattle

THE Scottish Secretary, Mr Malcolm Rifkind, yesterday faced cross-party criticism including from one of his Conservative back-benchers, Mr Alick Buchanan-Smith, MP for Kincardine and Deeside, over his decision to withdraw funding from Newbattle Abbey further education college in Midlothian.

Mr Buchanan-Smith asked Mr Rifkind what circumstances had changed since 1984 when HM Inspectors had reported that the college should continue. Mr Rifkind said that the vast majority of students at Newbattle did not require the kind of residential accommodation the college offered.

He assured Mr Buchanan-Smith that the resources saved, which he said in response to the Liberal leader, Mr David Steel, would be £500,000 a year for 40 graduates, would be used elsewhere in Scottish higher education.

Mrs Margaret Ewing (SNP, Moray) said the college had been bequeathed to the nation, and Mr Alex Eadie (Lab, Midlothian) accused the Government of shooting from the hip and asking questions later. He said Newbattle was Scotland's equivalent of the trade union-funded Ruskin College, Oxford.

"If Scotland is to have that means of adult education withdrawn, is that not a shoddy way to deal with education?" he said.

But Mr Rifkind criticised the trade unions, who he said were supporting the campaign to save the college, but only one union had contributed to its funding, and none had made any use of its facilities.

About 500 people marched through Edinburgh yesterday to protest at the decision to withdraw funding from Newbattle Abbey.

Friday, January 29, 1988



SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER

North Bridge, Edinburgh EH1 1YT. 031-225 2468

High price of new Paisley pattern ¹²

PARENTS of the pupils at Paisley Grammar School no doubt celebrated yesterday's decision by the Scottish Secretary, Mr Malcolm Rifkind, to give himself a whole new set of powers over education authorities. But their rejoicing ought to be tempered with the thought that it has been bought at a price, not so much perhaps to themselves — for their essential interest is by its nature largely temporary — but to the education system.

There are, of course, some arguments for greater centralisation of our education system, but on this occasion, the rationale appears to be plain politics and its immediate purpose is, bluntly, to save from closure a school that has become a symbol of the Government's ambitions in education reform.

It seems, moreover, that Mr Rifkind is not his own man in this matter. Mrs Thatcher willed the end, he simply devised the means — much to the satisfaction of his Education Minister, Mr Michael Forsyth, who has made no secret of his determination to keep the school open and now, thanks to the Prime Minister's intervention, has repaired some of the damage he suffered when his ambitions for reform were punctured by Mr Rifkind.

These are minor considerations, however, when set against the implications of what the Scottish Secretary has done. As on too many other occasions, the Government, faced with a particular problem, has so changed the general rules that more power has been transferred to the centre.

In this case the man in St Andrew's House is presumed to know best. The same officials who advised against adopting Mr Baker's opting out scheme in Scotland have thus produced a device which prevents it in another guise.

Rushing out the necessary regulations, the Scottish Secretary has yet to complete the extensive exercise about its closure proposals — further circumscribing the power of local authorities, his scheme of things local knowledge, experience and discretion are downgraded. He wants Strategic Education to deal with its surplus of school places but is not prepared to do so in a way that it judges is in the best interests of the community it serves.

If, as Mr Forsyth said, closing Paisley Grammar would be an act of vandalism, then the regulations devised to prevent it are a greater abuse of local democracy.

Educator Pd.

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From: J. ALLAN STEWART, M.P.

Prime Minister ②

MEP 4/2



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

3 February 1988

Dear Prime Minister,

PAISLEY GRAMMAR

Further to my letter of 22 January, there is of course now no need to reply or have a meeting. From parents I have had nothing but praise for the Government's decision. Very many thanks for your help in this matter.

I will continue to pursue the idea of having an opting out provision in Scotland, especially as it has been raised by a number of the Paisley Grammar parents.

Yours ever,
Allan

Rt Hon Mrs Margaret Thatcher MP
The Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London SW1

cc BA



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- 1. PRCC
- 2. LF - I hope you haven't been chasing this! Mr Stewart's

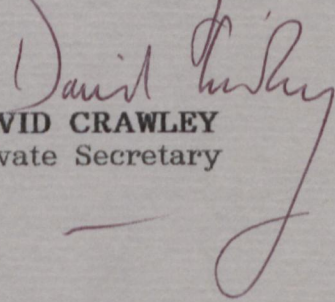
17 February 1988

letter of 3 Feb meant no further action needed, as it should have gone to SO.

MCS 17/c

Dear Mark,

Thank you for your letter of 25 January ^{step} enclosing a copy of a letter from Allan Stewart MP about Paisly Grammar School. This is in part now overtaken by events, but I attach a draft reply for the record.

Yours sincerely

 DAVID CRAWLEY
 Private Secretary

Enc

DRAFT FOR NO 10

Allan Stewart Esq MP
House of Commons
LONDON
SW1A 0AA

February 1988

PAISLEY GRAMMAR SCHOOL

The Prime Minister was very grateful for your letter of 22 January. Subsequent events are of course public knowledge and the regulations which were made by the Secretary of State for Scotland the following week will ensure that Strathclyde Regional Council would not be able to go ahead with the closure of the Grammar School without the Secretary of State's consent.

You also raised the wider issue of opting out. As you know, opting out is not a feature of the Government's current proposals for Scotland. Unlike England, Scotland has no tradition of local school management on which to build so that the establishment of school boards on a sound footing will be a pre-requisite of any further development. Both Malcolm Rifkind and Michael Forsyth have however made it plain that they do not rule out opting out as a possibility in the longer term, and they have given a clear undertaking to listen to all of the arguments presented during the passage of the forthcoming Education (Scotland) Bill.

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