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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

8 March 1988

Dear Martin,

EDUCATION REFORM IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Prime Minister was grateful for your Secretary of State's minute of 1 March and the attached detailed summary and copy of the Consultation Paper.

The Prime Minister is broadly content with your Secretary of State's proposals, subject to two points. First, she is concerned that religious education should be included as a foundation subject without having a centrally proscribed programme of study. Such a proposal for Northern Ireland could make it difficult to resist pressures for a similar concession for England and Wales.

Second, the Prime Minister has noted the proposals for two types of opted-out school. She wonders whether parents would be given the right to change the character of a voluntary school against the wishes of the trustees. Similar proposals for England and Wales were greeted with some hostility and the Prime Minister would be grateful for your Secretary of State's views on the likely strength of opposition that would arise in Northern Ireland.

I am copying this letter to the Private Secretaries to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Secretaries of State for Wales, Education and Science, and Scotland, the Chief Secretary and Sir Robin Butler.

*Yours,
P.G.*

PAUL GRAY

Martin Donnelly, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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PM/88/011

PRIME MINISTER

Educational Reform in Northern Ireland

1. I have seen the Northern Ireland Secretary's minute of 1 March.
2. I agree with Tom King that his proposals will be contentious; but I support them. It would be inconsistent not to carry the general thrust of our reforms in England and Wales into Northern Ireland; and we need to chip away at the sectarian basis of education in Northern Ireland.
3. I agree that we should explain the proposals to the Irish in advance. In the present Anglo-Irish climate, it is important that they should feel that they have had a proper opportunity to digest the proposals and that we are prepared to take some account of their views.
4. Leaving aside questions of educational approach, the Irish will want to know about the position of the Irish language in the common curriculum, both in Irish language schools and elsewhere. They will be particularly concerned about the proposals to introduce grant-maintained and grant-maintained integrated schools. They will be watching with some nervousness the response from both sides of the political divide in the North - and I imagine that both communities may be wary of parts of the consultative document.

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5. The Roman Catholic hierarchy may seek support from the Republic in preventing any perceived threat to their position. This will pose a dilemma for the Irish authorities. Their own education is to some extent organised on religious lines; but they will not want to be accused of opposing moves to foster reconciliation. Careful consultation on the points of interest to them may both insulate the Irish Government from denominational pressure and keep this issue separate from Anglo-Irish difficulties.

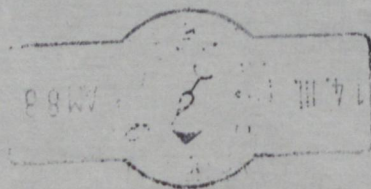
6. The consultative process will clearly throw up some difficult points for us. Tom King may want to consult colleagues again before going ahead with implementation. But the impact of his proposals on the denominational status quo seems likely to be less severe than the critics will argue, and it seems right to take this initial step.

7. I am copying this minute to the Northern Ireland Secretary, the Education Secretary, the Secretary of State for Wales, the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and Sir Robin Butler.

(GEOFFREY HOWE)

Foreign and Commonwealth Office
14 March 1988

EDUCATION: Policy



Prime Minister
Conceded with Mr. King's proposals
subject to two caveats from Brian.

Prime Minister

4 March 1988

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Education Reform in Northern Ireland

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The proposals in the Secretary of State's paper are broadly similar to those of England and Wales. Unlike for Scotland, there are provisions for schools to seek grant-maintained status. They are basically sound and deserve support.

I have just two comments:

- (a) the proposal for RE - namely that it should be included as a foundation subject but without having a centrally prescribed programme of study - is what a number of interest groups have sought for England and Wales: by allowing this proposal for Northern Ireland we weaken the case for not making a similar concession for England and Wales;
- (b) the paper proposes two types of opted-out school: grant-maintained schools and grant-maintained integrated schools. It would appear from the paper, but it is not absolutely clear, that parents will be given the right to change the character of a voluntary school, against the wishes of the trustees. In view of the hostility with which similar proposals for England and Wales were greeted, you might query the Secretary of State about (i) whether the proposals in fact allow this and (ii) the likely strength of opposition.

BG

BRIAN GRIFFITHS