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NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
WHITEHALL
LONDON SW1A 2AZ

Prime Minister

P Gray Esq
PS/Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
LONDON

Brian Griffiths thinks these comments
fully need the points raised. Content?

17 March 1988

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18/3

Dear Paul

with PG

Yes no

My Secretary of State has noted the Prime Minister's two points about the draft paper on education reform in Northern Ireland in your letter to me of 8 March. — attached.

He agrees that the first presents a genuine difficulty in Northern Ireland. The Province is very far from being a secular society, and the introduction of a National Curriculum which did not include religious education amongst the foundation subjects would certainly not be welcomed and indeed could jeopardise the acceptability of the whole package. Equally, Government could not be in the position of centrally prescribing a programme of study in religious education. However, in order to avoid any risk of unhelpful repercussions in England and Wales at this time, we intend to rewrite the relevant passage in the Consultative Document so as to present the problem and invite comments on the possible solution. The revised presentation will indicate -

- (1) that in the special and rather different circumstances of Northern Ireland many people may wish to see RE as a foundation subject;
- (2) but the approach in foundation subjects involves prescribed programmes of study which some may see as inappropriate for RE; and
- (3) views on the way forward in this sensitive area will be particularly welcomed.

On the Prime Minister's second point, the proposals in the Consultative Paper for grant-maintained status (as distinct from grant-maintained integrated status) specifically provide that a school would retain its existing character, including religious ethos, at the time of opting out, and that the Trustees would retain at least 50% of the places on the new Board of Governors.

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Leaving aside schools which already operate as integrated schools, those opting for grant-maintained integrated status would by definition be altering their character in response to the wishes of the parents. In practice, however, since the school would have to demonstrate that it had already achieved a degree of religious integration (a minimum of 20%) this would be a change of perceived rather than actual character. It is inevitable that the vested interests - particularly the churches - will be apprehensive about both types of grant-maintained status proposals. But the only alternative would be to allow the existing trustees an effective veto on applications for opting-out.

Experience clearly shows that this in-built resistance to change must be overcome if any measurable progress is to be made in encouraging integrated education in Northern Ireland. These proposals represent the first real opportunity to start the process which could lead to a significant number of children from both communities in Northern Ireland being educated together and I believe that we must stand firm on this. The social consequences of the change we seek to achieve will be of more lasting significance and benefit in Northern Ireland, than in the rest of the country. Although I do not underestimate the opposition there may be from the churches and other, I believe that we will be able to ring-fence the very specific context of this issue from the broader discussion of Mr Baker's bill.

I am copying this letter to the recipients of yours.

yours sincerely

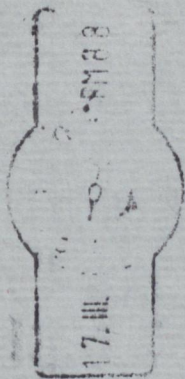
Martin Donnelly

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EDUCATION: Policy Pt 17



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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

21 March 1988

Dear Martin,

EDUCATION REFORM IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Prime Minister was grateful for the further material in your letter to me dated 17 March. She is now content for your Secretary of State to proceed on the basis proposed.

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,
Paul.*

PAUL GRAY

Martin Donnelly, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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