



THE RT. HON. MICHAEL ALISON, M.P.

CCB/A
CGB/106
HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

8 April 1988

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher, MP
10 Downing Street
LONDON SW1

Dear Margaret,

Christian religious education in schools

Caroline Cox and I, together with James Pawsey and Anthony Coombs, are looking forward to meeting you on April 12, to discuss some amendments to the Education Reform Bill which Caroline would like to move in the House of Lords. We are very grateful to you for being prepared to give us the necessary time.

I sent you a memorandum before Easter, to outline our areas of concern, and to prepare the ground for the (earlier) meeting with you which was, in the event, postponed. I hope you will allow me now briefly to supplement that memorandum with some further points which we would like to discuss with you on Tuesday.

(1) Kenneth Baker's useful changes to the Education Reform Bill on Report undoubtedly safeguard and strengthen the place of religious education in the school curriculum. But we still believe that the deal struck with the Bishops could actually be counter-productive if it merely entrenches the wrong kind of R E. And so far, the Bill has failed to tackle the issue of how the existing local methods for determining religious syllabuses have manifestly led to the almost scandalous situation prevailing today. Why should the Department of Education be so blithely willing to trust LEAs to produce satisfactory locally agreed RE syllabuses, when the whole thrust of the Bill is that such local authorities, in other vital areas, are simply not to be trusted, and must have statutory guidelines imposed on them?

(2) One reason why the present range of locally- agreed RE syllabuses is so unsatisfactory is precisely the absence of any specific reference to the Christian religion in the 1944 Act's religious provisions. It could then be taken for granted; now it cannot. For example, the local Agreed Syllabus Conference (as



- 2 -

you will recall), consists of four committees - one representing the LEA, one representing the teachers, one representing the Church of England, and one representing denominations other than the C of E. In a number of instances, this latter committee has been re-interpreted to mean, not other Christian denominations (the original intention) but other faiths.

The Brent syllabus vividly illustrates how this misinterpretation of the 1944 Act has been abused. Its preamble states that:-

"In the syllabus the word faith is understood to mean any consistent, coherent and ethical religion or life stance whether theistic or non-theistic."

This definition clearly leaves the way open for the teaching of atheistic ideologies and world-views such as Marxism. And the Brent Committee representing "denominations other than the Church of England," which helped to draw up the syllabus, had 23 members, 15 of whom were from non-Christian faiths - 2 Bahai, 1 Buddhist, 2 Hindu, 1 Humanist, 2 Muslim, 2 Janist, 3 Jew, 1 Sikh, and 1 Zoroastrian. The parallel Manchester LEA committee had 45 members, the majority of whom were non-Christian. The same is true for Bradford LEA.

(3) In the light of what I have written above, our contention is that it is naive - and worse - to consider that the Bill as amended at Report has done all that needs to be for RE, so that the rest can cheerfully be left for local application. If nothing more is done to specify and entrench in the statute that the Christian religion should be the predominant component of RE, then the reverse is likely to occur, and in many parts of the Country the Christian religion will become a minority, even a marginal feature of RE syllabuses. We are not advocating an exclusively Christian definition for RE. We believe that some exposure to other faiths is desirable. But we believe that these "other faiths" altogether should never exceed, say 25 per cent of an RE syllabus, and considerably less in Primary Schools.

(4) One of your own most striking initiatives has been your open advocacy for a moral and spiritual revival in Britain to complement the industrial and economic



- 3 -

regeneration which your policies have so manifestly put in hand. We believe that you share our conviction that the moral and spiritual revival our nation - above all our children - so desperately need must be based on our historic Christian faith, rather than on Buddhism, or Zoroastrianism, or a pot pourri of other faiths. Kenneth Baker clearly shares our views, too. In Crawley, last December, he said -

"What the vast majority of children have been utterly starved of are the riches of the spirit. Their ignorance of the historic religious faith of this country, a faith which has inspired and guided so many of its greatest men and women, is a national disgrace."

But we suspect that his robust views are not wholly shared in the Department of Education. Your DES Minister in the House of Lords, for example, recently said that "We are no longer a predominantly Christian nation and our schools reflect the multi-faith nature of Britain in 1988." (OR 26. 2. 88). With respect, we believe that view to be nonsense and worse - almost subversive. If such a view prevails, there is little hope of a revival of faith and morals based upon Christianity, "If the trumpet sounds an uncertain note, who will prepare himself for battle?" We are convinced that the Education Reform Bill must sound an unmistakable note, the specification of "predominantly Christian" as the statutory definition of religious instruction.

Yours ever
Michael.

MICHAEL ALISON



The following Bishops in the
Church of England have
told me explicitly that they
favour defining RE in the Bill
as predominantly Christian.

- 1 Bath & Wells
- 2 Bradford
- 3 Chelmsford (in Lords)
- 4 Chester (in Lords)
- 5 Coventry
- 6 Ely (in Lords)
- 7 Lincoln
- 8 Oxford
- 9 Peterborough
- 10 St. Albans (in Lords)
- 11 Salisbury (in Lords)
- 12 Selby (Suffragan)
- 13 London. (in Lords)

CF



file

SA

10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

11 April 1988

Your Secretary of State will wish to see a further letter from Michael Alison MP about Christian religious education in schools, which is relevant to his meeting with the Prime Minister tomorrow, 12 April. Mr. Baker and the Minister of State (Mrs. Rumbold) have been invited to the meeting.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Mr. Johnstone (Minister of State, Department of Education and Science).

N. L. WICKS

Tom Jeffery, Esq.,
Department of Education and Science



10 DOWNING STREET

PRIME MINISTER

There is a further letter in
the folder from Michael Alison
which you have not yet seen.

N.L.W.

NLW

11.4.88



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

9/4

Dear Shana,

Could you kindly
use your good offices to
get the attached letter
before the PM's eyes, in
time for her to read it
(if possible!) before 18 other
colleagues meet her on
Tuesday?

Yours ever
Michael
A