



PRIME MINISTER

GCE A LEVELS: HIGGINSON COMMITTEE REPORT

In the light of our helpful discussion on 19 May, I am circulating a draft Parliamentary statement to accompany publication of the report.

It makes clear that the Government has decided not to pursue the key recommendation for a five subject A level programme with streamlined A level syllabuses, and it does not of course commit us to take forward any of the detailed recommendations. As agreed at E(EP), the statement promotes the existing Government policy of broadening by use of AS levels. There is increasing interest in schools in these new examinations, and I am continuing to promote and publicise them widely.

Peter Walker and I propose to publish the Higginson report on Tuesday 7 June. I should be grateful for clearance by Monday 6 June.

I am copying this minute to members of E(EP), to Tom King and to Sir Robin Butler.

KB

KB
Department of Education and Science

2 June 1988

DRAFT PARLIAMENTARY ANSWER TO COINCIDE WITH PUBLICATION OF THE HIGGINSON REPORT

My rt hon Friend, the Secretary for Wales, and I are publishing today the report of the Committee chaired by Dr Higginson on GCE Advanced Levels. We are grateful to Dr Higginson and his colleagues for the considerable time and energies that they have devoted to its preparation.

This does not reflect our conclusions but contradicts them.

We don't

We endorse the Committee's recommendations for general principles which should govern A levels, which take forward the policies that we have been pursuing on the curriculum and examinations in order to raise levels of attainment.

*Substitute
Dunn's
alternative*

We therefore welcome and endorse the Committee's recommendations that A levels should be demanding, single-subject, examinations for able candidates of all kinds and from all backgrounds, and that they should develop students' understanding and powers of reasoning as well as covering a significant area of knowledge. We support the recognition of the need for rigorous assessment arrangements.

The report also indicates widespread support for increased breadth of study for 16-18 year olds undertaking A level courses in full-time education. It recommends that such students should, if possible, study five subjects, some at A level and some at GCE Advanced Supplementary (AS) level. ~~To allow for study of more subjects, A level syllabuses should be streamlined, and students should devote more of their timetables to examination studies.~~

The Government does not accept the need to study five subjects but believes that needs further consideration

The Government endorses the general aim of broadening A level students' programmes of study. We see AS levels as the key to achieving greater breadth and hence welcome the Committee's backing for a continuing vital role for these new examinations, both in securing breadth of study and in supplementing main areas of study. Following the introduction of AS levels last year, A level students, by choosing a mix of A and AS level syllabuses, are already able to put

together broader and more balanced programmes of study. ~~We therefore encourage all schools and colleges to offer their A level students some choice of AS levels this autumn, and greater choice in future.~~

Proposals
The Committee's ~~detailed proposals for implementation of its recommendations~~ give a central role to the School Examinations and Assessment Council, whose establishment in shadow form was recently announced. In view of the substantial tasks facing that Council as early priorities - in particular, the introduction of assessment and testing arrangements for the national curriculum and the establishment, monitoring and review of GCSE - the Government does not consider it appropriate at present to ask the Council to embark on the review and streamlining of all A level syllabuses as recommended by the Committee. Increased provision of AS levels by schools and colleges, and full recognition of their value and importance in the admission arrangements of institutions of higher education, will encourage broader studies amongst A level students. The Government will continue to monitor closely the introduction and take-up of AS levels and will consider, in the light of progress, whether further steps are needed to secure the necessary broadening of post-16 education.

Of course not - because we haven't approved the proposals



File MJ
CCBS

10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

7 June 1988

Dear Tom,

PARLIAMENTARY ANSWERS ON ASSESSMENT AND TESTING
AND ON HIGGINSON COMMITTEE REPORT

The Prime Minister was very grateful for your Secretary of State's two separate minutes dated 2 June. This is to confirm that the Prime Minister is content for Parliamentary answers to be given today, subject to the amendments discussed between us.

I am copying this letter to the Private Secretaries to members of E(EP), David Watkins (Northern Ireland Office) and to Sir Robin Butler.

*Yours,
P.G.*

Paul Gray

Tom Jeffery, Esq.,
Department of Education and Science.

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PRIME MINISTER

Note

Passed PM's decision

to DES. Recd 7/6

PARLIAMENTARY ANSWER ON PUBLICATION OF THE HIGGINSON REPORT

You saw over the weekend the DES proposed Answers to arranged PQs on both Assessment and Testing and the Higginson Report on 'A' levels.

DES have accepted in full your comments on the Assessment and Testing Answer, which will now be given tomorrow.

On Higginson, you called for substantial redrafting and asked to see a revised version. During the day, Brian and I have had several discussions with DES about this. I now attach a revised draft they have sent over (together with the original draft for comparison). Brian has two further comments on the redraft:

- (i) Delete the first sentence of paragraph 2, and simply start that paragraph saying "The Government welcomes the Committee's endorsement of 'A' levels as demanding ..."
- (ii) Delete the second sentence of paragraph 4, on the grounds that this both breaks the flow and makes an unnecessary reference to the SEAC.

I have discussed these points with Mr. Baker's office, and he is reluctant to accept them in full. He has, however, suggested two amendments, which I have marked in red on the revised draft. The DES argument is that:

- (i) The opening to paragraph 2 refers to the general principles in chapter 2 of the Higginson Report, and not to the detailed implementation in chapter 3.
- (ii) In paragraph 4 Mr. Baker is keen to be able to make some reference to the priority tasks of the SEAC when he makes this announcement.

Are you content with the DES amendments to the revised draft as marked in red, or do you want to make the more radical changes suggested by Brian of deleting the first sentence of paragraph 2 and the second sentence of paragraph 4?

PREC.

Paul Gray

6 June 1988

I think we must
accept the amendments in
red. He has come quite
a way towards our view.
no

REVISED DRAFT

Ms Carban
Mr P Wandle
Mrs Butler
Mr M Wandle
Sci
Miss Hodgkinson

PARLIAMENTARY ANSWER ON PUBLICATION OF THE HIGGINSON REPORT

1. Mr rt hon Friend, the Secretary of State for Wales, and I are publishing today the report of the Committee chaired by Dr Higginson on GCE Advanced levels. We are grateful to Dr Higginson and his colleagues for the considerable time and energies that they have devoted to its preparation.

welcome
2. We broadly ~~endorse~~ the general principles for A levels set out by the Committee in Chapter 2 of its report, ^{and in} in particular, we ~~do~~ ^{it} welcome the ~~Committee's~~ endorsement ^{of} on A levels as demanding, single-subject examinations for able candidates of all kinds and all backgrounds. We have reservations, however, on the Committee's detailed proposals for streamlining syllabuses by reducing their factual content.

3. The report ~~also~~ indicates widespread support for increased breadth of study for 16-18 year olds undertaking A level courses in full-time education. It recommends that such students should, if possible, study five subjects, some at A level and some at GCE Advanced Supplementary (AS) level and, to allow for study of more subjects, that A level syllabuses should be streamlined, and students should devote more of their timetables to examination studies.

4. The Government endorses the general aim of broadening A level students' programmes of study but does not accept the Committee's proposals for achieving that objective through a five subject programme incorporating leaner A level syllabuses. ~~We believe that the substantial tasks for the Schools Examinations and Assessment Council as early priorities must be the introduction of assessment and testing arrangements for the national curriculum and the establishment, monitoring and review of GCSE.~~ We see AS levels as the key to achieving greater breadth, and hence, we welcome the Committee's backing for a continuing role for these new examinations, both in securing breadth of study and

The education service already has a substantial agenda for reform; we want the School Examinations and Assessment Council to concentrate on the tasks of introducing

in supplementing main areas of study. Following the introduction of AS levels last year, A level students, by choosing a mix of A and AS level syllabuses, are already able to put together broader and more balanced programmes of study. The Government will continue to monitor closely the introduction and take-up of AS levels and will consider, in the light of progress, whether further steps are needed to secure the necessary broadening of post-16 education.

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CONFIDENTIAL

Prime Minister

Content - with these amendments?

PRIME MINISTER

3 June 1988

MS
3/6

This won't do. No - this statement does not

Higginson Report on 'A' levels :
Draft Parliamentary Response

accord with our
conclusions. It
must be redrafted.

This draft Parliamentary answer is a quite inadequate reflection of the decision which were taken in E(EP).

Brian Griffiths needs
for some
E(EP) 28) 5th indication.

E(EP) did not endorse the Committee's recommendations on the principles which should govern 'A' levels or on the way in which 'A' levels should be reformed. This is clear from the minutes of the meeting (enclosed).

Listen we
need to
need to
discuss

Paragraphs 2 and 3 of the draft answer suggests that we do welcome the recommendations of Higginson. It then goes on to argue that we cannot implement the Report because SEAC is overworked.

a new draft -
in this
can
redraft
on Monday
morning and
send it

This would be a quite misleading interpretation of what was decided.

access by

In addition the final sentence of para 4 cuts right across the decisions made in E(EP).

much has
not

I see the initial minutes were typed wrongly! I hope they were corrected before being sent

1

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out of that a correction has now been made

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Recommendation

- (a) Paras 2 and 3 should be deleted and replaced by something such as:

"We welcome the Committee's endorsement of 'A' levels as demanding, single-subject examinations for able candidates of all kinds and all backgrounds. We have reservations however over detailed proposals for streamlining syllabuses and for reducing the factual content of individual syllabuses."

- (b) The final sentence of paragraph 4 should be deleted.

Brian Griffiths

BRIAN GRIFFITHS

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