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Prime Minister

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Do you wish to  
write as proposed?

13 May 1987

Cabinet

DR

13/5.

The National Curriculum: Machinery to Oversee Examinations

and Assessment and Testing

This paper seems at first straightforward. But on re-reading I am far from convinced it is satisfactory. It has two basic problems.

Centralisation and Restriction of Examining Bodies

First, it proposes a centralisation of the machinery to oversee assessment and testing at the ages of 7, 11 and 14 and recommends one specific body for this purpose, the Secondary Examinations Council. This contrasts with the present arrangement for 'O' levels, 'A' levels and GCSE, which operate through direct contracts between LEAs and the five private sector GCSE examining groups.

This body will exercise 'National control and monitoring' (para 4) and it would be given "new responsibility to secure and monitor local procedures for moderating, testing and assessment at the earlier ages". All payments for the new exams would be made through the SEC which is a quango of the Department of Education and Science.

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The paper recognises that these proposals will be opposed by the examining bodies.

"I do not underestimate the potential opposition of the latter to my proposals which they see as restricting their freedom to operate commercially." (para 12)

At present the five GCSE Examining Boards are private companies/trusts. This proposal is an attempt to rationalise their activities and allow DES much greater authority and control over them. DES have long resented the independence of examining boards, which is why they abolished 'O' level and why they still wish to bring 'A' level under legislation. This proposal is the thin edge of the wedge of their ultimately controlling the detailed output of individual boards, and therefore suffers from all the traditional weaknesses of centralised control.

It should be rejected.

#### Secondary Examination Council

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Second, there is the choice by the Secretary of State of the Secondary Examination Council, as the body which will administer the National Curriculum.

**This absolutely terrifies me.**

The SEC is the body which controls the GCSE. Its head (Cockcroft), staff, and numerous contacts within the teaching profession (who sit on its advisory panels) are not surprisingly totally committed to GCSE.

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I have no doubt whatever that they will take GCSE as their starting point, and shape assessment and testing at ages 7, 11 and 14 within the framework of GCSE.

I cannot think of any more inauspicious start to such an imaginative concept as a National Curriculum, as the involvement of SEC. It will mean that the national curriculum will be established under the shadow of GCSE.

#### Recommendation

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- \* Although dealing with seemingly straightforward administrative matters these proposals strike at the very heart of your attempt to raise standards in schools.
- \* The proposals need much more discussion - not in H Committee - but first with yourself.
- \* Reject the proposals and suggest to the Secretary of State that you will convene a meeting after the election to discuss the implementation of the whole and not just a part of the National Curriculum, which is what this paper is attempting to do.

R. Crossman

for

BRIAN GRIFFITHS

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