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PRIME MINISTER

17 July 1987

The National Curriculum

The reason for establishing a core curriculum was to raise minimum standards and improve the 3 Rs in our schools. It was to be achieved by specifying attainment levels in core subjects, developing appropriate syllabuses and testing for standards of various ages.

What is now being proposed however is:

- a National Curriculum of 10 subjects accounting for 80-90% of school time;
- different attainment targets for children of different abilities;
- assessments which "will not denote 'passing' or 'failing' but levels of achievements within the norm of expected range" (para 20);
- much of the assessment will be internal to the school with "nationally prescribed tests and other assessment procedures" being relegated to a small role;
- the setting up of two new bodies - the National Curriculum Council and the School Examination and Assessment Council (SEAC);
- a monopoly right for the latter body "to specify what public qualifications can be offered to pupils during compulsory schooling";

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- the mechanism for monitoring the National Curriculum to be a more powerful and almost certainly expanded LEA inspectorate;
- a greatly expanded role for the Assessment of Performance Unit in the DES.

I am afraid I must advise you that I have no confidence that these proposals will guarantee higher standards in our schools: standards may be raised but by these proposals equally they may not.

In my judgement the whole exercise is marred by being a compromise between your ideas and those of HMI. We now face the real danger that the end result of this exercise will be the enshrinement in law of the philosophy and methodology of the HMI. Many of our own supporters who are keen to raise standards will be desperately unhappy with these proposals. Meanwhile progressive educationalists will judge them as a Thatcherite takeover. We risk pleasing no-one and alienating a great many people.

This consultation document must not be allowed to be issued in its existing form.

To soften the blow to the Secretary of State it might be worth talking to him along the lines,

"This is the first opportunity we have had to look at the proposals for the National Curriculum as a whole. and we now need to make a fundamental assessment of where we are before we make a major statement"

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Issues which need addressing

National Curriculum or Core Curriculum

The foundation subjects of the National Curriculum are English, maths, science, modern languages, technology, history, geography, art, music and PE.

You have consistently argued that what is needed are "detailed basic syllabuses for a core group of subjects."

You need to emphasise once again that the core is fundamental and should be small rather than a large number of subjects.

One way forward might be to say that the National Curriculum was made up of four parts:

- (a) a basic core of English, maths and science - which was compulsory - and for which detailed syllabuses would be developed;
- (b) a set of non-basic subjects - technology, foreign languages, history and geography - for which the Secretary of State would issue guidelines or a model curriculum, but which would not have to be followed in the same way as the core;
- (c) optional subjects - music, art;
- (d) PE which is compulsory.

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Attainment targets, assessment and examinations

This document does its best to downgrade attainment levels (it uses the word targets instead), to shy away from the setting of absolute standards (which are discussed as "levels of achievement within the expected normal range" see para 209 and nationally set examinations (which it makes the junior partner to school based assessment processes).

Not only must judgement about people be related to the full ability range but "judgement about the achievements of both pupils and schools must take full account of the relevant background socio-economic factors".

In other words the document

- (a) rejects absolute standards set for all,
- (b) places major emphasis on in-class assessment rather than national external tests, and
- (c) because it categorises people in terms of their intrinsic ability and socio-economic background in fact denies them opportunity.

It would be much better if we had tests for all, right across the board, with questions becoming increasingly more difficult.

National Curriculum Council (NCC) and Schools Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC)

The establishment of these two new quangos raise three issues:

- do we need two rather than one new body?
I very much doubt it.

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- Should the NCC carry out "a programme of research and development commitment within the requirements of the national curriculum".

This is an invitation to set up a permanent research institution. In view of the proliferation of existing research institutions in this field it seems unnecessary to set up a new permanent body. Far better to contract out the research, should it prove necessary, to enterprising individuals.

- Is it right for the Bill to give powers to specify "what public qualifications can be offered to pupils during compulsory schooling".

This seems an entirely gratuitous grafting on of an item which is peripheral to the main concern of the paper.

Monitoring, Inspection and Enforcement

Section (g) of the paper - from pages 22 through 25 seems a positively new lease of life for LEAs.

"The Secretaries of State consider that inspectors appointed by LEAs should be the main mechanism locally for monitoring the delivery of the national curriculum in LEA maintained schools".

How much of an inspectorate do we really need? If the results of national tests are published and parents are informed of the figures then they will form a national inspectorate. Of course we will need some individuals who can then go into schools and conduct an inquiry.

Why could not this be done by the HMI? They could be diverted from some of their existing activities, with great advantage to all.

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Assessment of Performance Unit (APU)

Under these proposals this Unit would play a major role. I have no direct experience of the Unit but various comments from educationalists I respect, suggest that it is not highly rated.

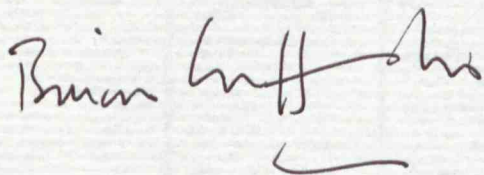
Angela Rumbold has said that in order to play the new role envisaged it would have to be reconstituted in a major way. In that case why not contract out the arrangement to some outside body?

Conclusion

The present proposals are fundamentally flawed.

While one can criticise individual suggestions the real problem is that the whole document is shot through with education mumbo-jumbo which if published is a liability to the government.

We need a new document, rewritten on different lines. If we do not, we risk being attacked from all sides.



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