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PRIME MINISTER

NATIONAL CURRICULUM

1. I have seen the record of our discussion in E(EP) on 28 October and I thought I ought to let you know immediately that I am troubled about the relationship between what it says and our announced policies collectively agreed.

2. First, the minutes record as the firm view of the sub-committee that no more than 70% of the curriculum should be taken up by the core and foundation subjects. They also record that the sub-committee was not convinced that art or music should be compulsory subjects.

3. We all recognise that the allocation of curriculum time is not an issue which will be dealt with in either primary or subordinate legislation. The figures quoted in our consultation document were purely illustrative of good practice in a number of schools, not a basis for prescription.

4. I share the general view that we must allow flexibility. To ensure that, I am content to issue no guidance about how much time schools might be expected to devote to particular subjects. I am also willing to indicate privately rather than publicly to each subject working group how much time they should assume they have available in recommending attainment targets and programmes of study - but clearly we have to give them some indication. I am happy to emphasise to schools and teachers that it is for them to decide how they will timetable their teaching in order to ensure that pupils reach the standards described in the attainment targets. I should expect brighter pupils to need considerably less than 80% of their curriculum time for successful study of the core and other foundation subjects.

5. But what runs counter to previously agreed policies which I and my Ministerial team have been advocating and defending vigorously

is the suggestion that we should pare down the list of compulsory foundation subjects, whether to increase the time available for other studies or for any other reason. My statement to the Select Committee on Education and the Arts on 7th April - which I cleared with you - listed 10 essential subjects. Our consultation document on the national curriculum, which was considered in detail by E(EP) colleagues and approved by them, lists the same 10 subjects, the important qualification being that we would issue guidelines rather than attainment targets for music, art and PE. The consultation exercise we have undertaken provides the Government with no reason to revise the list of core and other foundation subjects, which has been widely welcomed as offering a broad and balanced curriculum. On the contrary, if we were to remove art and music from the list of compulsory subjects we should attract a volume of criticism which would far outweigh that of the classicists' lobby.

6. I believe that we must stick to ten compulsory foundation subjects. But I am quite willing to make it clear that three - music, art and PE - will take up little time in most pupils' curricula in the last two years of compulsory schooling. However, about 70% of curriculum time for the average pupil in a school with average working hours will be needed for proper study of the other subjects. If we reduce our expectations of the time required for such study below that, we shall reduce standards of achievement.

7. Second, the minutes record that the sub-committee "remained unconvinced of the need to set attainment targets in other subjects [than the core] such as technology, history and geography". This is at variance with the sub-committee's previous decisions on 22 July when it endorsed the consultative document on the national curriculum. We agreed then that the only subjects for which no attainment targets should be set were music, art and physical education. Again we have no basis in the results of consultation for departing from our agreed policy.

8. I am firmly convinced that the only way we shall increase standards of teaching and of pupil attainment in the foundation subjects is by setting clear objectives and by assessing pupils'

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performance against those objectives. If we do not set out in attainment targets what we expect pupils to know and understand in, for example, history - and then check to make sure that they are coming up to expectations - we shall not be able to ensure that all pupils have a real sense of the flow of British history rather than a partial knowledge of disconnected facts about diverse periods and those countries that happen to interest particular groups of teachers. In order to respond to clear demands from industry and commerce we need to push up standards in pupils' understanding of design and technology and in their competence in modern foreign languages. These are not matters which can be left to chance.

9. We are due to introduce our Education Reform Bill in three weeks' time. The clauses on the national curriculum have already been drafted to reflect previously agreed policy. The Parliamentary draftsmen are heavily engaged with other parts of the Bill which are much less advanced than the national curriculum clauses. To amend those clauses to reflect what is recorded in E(EP) minutes would require a total restructuring of this part of the Bill.

10. I should be grateful if we could discuss my concerns about the E(EP) minutes.

K.S.

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Department of Education and Science

30 October 1987