

cc. N. Gibson.

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From: PS/Secretary of State (B)
7 May 1991

- cc PS/Sofs (B&L) - B
- PS/Paymaster General (B,L&DENI) - B
- PS/MofS (B&L) - B
- PS/PUS (B&L) - B
- PS/Mr Fell - B
- Mr Semple
- Mr Carvill
- Mr Hill, DENI
- Mr Holmes, DENI
- Mr Wallace, DENI
- Mr McNeill - B
- Mr Smith, DENI

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

MEETING WITH NORTHERN CATHOLIC BISHOPS

The Secretary of State, accompanied by the Paymaster General, met a delegation led by Archbishop Daly in the Conference Room in Stormont Castle on Monday afternoon, 29 April. The Archbishop was accompanied by Bishop Edward Daly, Bishop Patrick Walsh, Monsignor McCaughan (Director, CCMS), Mr P J McCavera (Deputy Director CCMS), Mr I O'Connell (Principal St Mary's College), Sister Claire O'Brien (St Mary's College) and the Rev M O'Callaghan (St Mary's College). Mr Carvill, Mr Holmes, Mr Smith and I were also present.

2. Archbishop Daly opened by expressing his appreciation of the time which the Secretary of State and the Paymaster General had given over to the meeting, particularly in the midst of other pressures. He hoped that it would be the beginning of a fruitful consultation period on the various matters which concerned him and his colleagues and that it would lead at least to some broad agreement on the structure for further detailed discussions.

3. The central thrust of the delegation's concerns was that the Catholic school system was not performing to its full potential. Archbishop Daly said that he and his colleagues accepted a measure of responsibility on their side. But there remained two important issues to be addressed urgently - funding for Catholic schools and the uncertainty over the future of St Mary's College. With regard

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to the former, Archbishop Daly said that there was incontestable evidence of serious under-funding, not necessarily the result of a deliberate policy but more from a combination of factors over the years. He recognised that efforts had been made to close the gap but it would still be quite some time before the imbalance was completely redressed. Even if it were, the problem of capital funding and the need to increase grants to trustees would remain. With regard to St Mary's College, there was growing concern about an apparent lack of faith on the part of Government in relation to an agreement with Mr Prior in 1985, and thereby about the College's future.

4. Following prompting by the Secretary of State, these and other issues were taken in the following order:

a. St Mary's College

Mr O'Connell spoke at some length about the future of the college. He said that the delegation's submission on the subject (St Mary's College: Catholic Teacher Education in Northern Ireland (April 1991)) stemmed from the spirit of the agreement with Mr Prior and was based on the premise that the College would be a viable, autonomous Catholic institution. Decisions by DENI officials since then might well have been taken in good faith but they had not always recognised the Catholic viewpoint. As far as he and others connected with the College were concerned, the writing had been on the wall since January of this year following a letter from the Department. Citing the removal of French from the curriculum and uncertainty over block-granting as examples, Mr O'Connell wondered whether the Department really had a well articulated policy for Colleges, especially St Mary's. The education system generally was obviously going through a period of major change and he and his colleagues wanted to meet the various challenges facing them. In the absence of a policy in the Department on such critical areas as pupil numbers, staffing, the

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curriculum and finance, however, it was extremely difficult to plan ahead for all phases of Catholic education. Archbishop Daly added to this list the question of capital funding for St Mary's on the Falls Road site.

Responding, the Secretary of State said in the context of viability that he understood the anxiety over pupil numbers but that the recent downward trend was unlikely to persist and the College's future, therefore, was in his view assured. He was less clear on how its autonomy was being eroded, and he received little clarification from the delegation in response.

Mr Carvill added that it was important to bear in mind the different trends in primary and secondary education. The Department's projections in the primary sector indicated a bottoming-out and on this basis it was anticipated that long-term enrolment would be in the region of 750-800. The Paymaster General said that he, too, fully understood the delegation's concerns, particularly on viability, and he offered to discuss them further. Meanwhile, on capital provision the Department felt that planning for decanting and related issues could go ahead with a view to a move some time within the next 2-3 years. He and his officials would also welcome the opportunity of a joint study on the College.

b. Capital Grants

Bishop Walsh spoke briefly to the subject of higher grants, on which subject the Churches' views were well known. Responding, the Paymaster General said that he understood the mis-match, though he gently corrected the Archbishop by saying that it was systemic rather than systematic. There had been a genuine effort to skew resources towards the maintained sector. Moreover, in spite of the problems with the new formula funding, there

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were already indications that it was addressing the mis-match problem. Meanwhile, it was the Department's policy to try to deal with areas of particular pressure and concern out of minor works and it would look at ways in which this might become more permanent. Mr Carvill added that the Department was particularly aware of the pressures on grammar schools and was willing to look at options for the Belfast area similar to those already examined in the west of the Province.

In relation to the voluntary authorities' contribution, the Secretary of State said that when he had met the Church delegation in 1989 he had recalled his father's work in 1944 which had given rise to the current figure of 15%. He fully understood why the matter was important to the Church, but he had said then that in looking at the issue of capital funding it would be necessary to look again at the conditions under which the original 15% had been established. He could only repeat that observation.

c. Preparation of Young People

Mr McCavera spoke on this topic, referring in particular to page 9 of the delegation's submission "The Catholic Education System in Northern Ireland", dated 24 April 1991. He said that the Church sought DENI support in looking at alternative forms of post-primary school education, especially in areas of the Province such as the Short Strand in Belfast, Dungannon and Strabane.

The Secretary of State said he agreed with Mr McCavera's comparison with the German model. While Northern Ireland had a better academic record than GB at the top end of the scale, the converse was true for those leaving school without qualifications, though admittedly the rate was falling faster than in GB. He agreed with the Church's basic analysis and he illustrated the Government's

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commitment in terms of the third public spending priority (Targeting Social Need). The Paymaster General added that the Curriculum Council had been asked for advice on the matter and he assured the delegation that the Church's views would be borne in mind.

d. Council for Catholic Maintained Schools

The delegation made the following key points:

- i. the foundation of the CCMS was a significant and vitally important development for the Church and its role should be more developed as a central, unified management body for all Catholic schools;
- ii. the Council played a central role in detecting deficiencies in the Catholic education system and was intended to help Government. However, it was not performing to its potential because its structure did not accord with the agreement which the Church thought had been reached.

Bishop Walsh said that the Council had 2 main aims - to provide an appropriate input to education policy and to take responsibility for the central management of the Catholic maintained schools. He then summarised section 23 of the delegation's submission (see sub paragraph (c) above), referring in particular to statements by Dr Mawhinney. He said that the agreement which the Church felt had been reached then had not been honoured and that this had weakened the Church's position in the management of its schools. Mr McCavera said it was essential that the CCMS should be put on a par with the Education and Library Boards. The present method of consultation was simply not working.

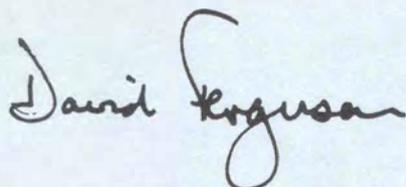
Responding, the Paymaster General said that in his view the CCMS's contribution had been significant and that it

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was wrong to deny that the Education Reform Order had had an impact. He undertook, however, to consider the matter further with his officials and he offered a further discussion with the delegation.

5. The meeting ended cordially at this point, with the Paymaster General and officials indicating that they would discuss in the margins the mechanism for carrying the various issues forward with the delegation.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David Ferguson".

DAVID FERGUSON
Private Secretary

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