



10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

THE PRIME MINISTER

27 January 1997

Dear John,

When I met you and the leaders of other Northern Ireland political parties on 23 January, to discuss the Government's proposals for a restructuring of the Province's education and library boards, you made clear your concerns about the possible effects of the Government's proposals on the political, social and educational life of the Province. I said I would write to confirm what I told you at the meeting.

As you know, the decisions announced by Michael Ancram in June last year were the culmination of a four year process of review and consultation. Following the announcement, Michael again responded as fully as possible to the concerns which local communities understandably felt about the prospect of change to a system which has been in operation for over twenty years.

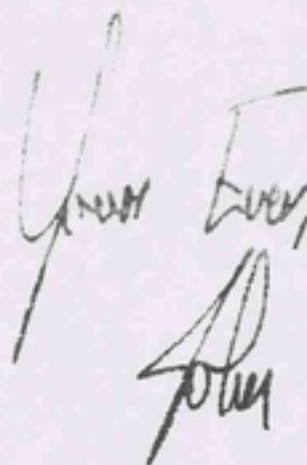
While many have found the prospect of change unsettling, there have also been expressions of support. In any case, the Government's only aim is to ensure an effective and efficient service to schools and the wider public, worthwhile economies in administration, and a coherent approach to tackling education priorities across the Province.

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I accept that, given the widespread concerns which have been expressed, it is right for the issues to be fully debated in Parliament, and presumably in the Northern Ireland Grand Committee. Given the many pressures on Parliamentary time in the current session, it would be difficult to provide adequately for this debate at present. I have therefore concluded that the proposals should not be taken forward until the next Parliamentary session, which will also allow time for a further period of reflection.

Michael Ancram will shortly be explaining in more detail the practical implications of this.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'John Birt', with a stylized flourish underneath.

The Lord Alderdice