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10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

31 March 1983

Dear Lady Cox,

Thank you for your letter of 16 March.

I share your concern about the situation at the Polytechnic of North London; so does Keith Joseph as you know. He has made his view plain to the CNAА (to whom Miss Jeffery addressed her complaint); they intend to mount an enquiry.

On the question of student unions, I agree that we have seen recently a number of disturbing examples of political activity. However, I am afraid that student unions cannot accurately be described, in the normal sense of the term, as closed shops. They are integral parts of their parent institutions and their constitutional position is defined in Articles of Government - or of Association in the case of London polytechnics - and the rules made under them. Under these Articles the ILEA cannot be prevented from earmarking sums in aid of union functions, and Keith has very little power to intervene. Indeed his predecessor's announcement of the new funding system (which did not incidentally require legislation) acknowledged that it could be appropriate for local authorities to be concerned in the question of allocation. He is, however, currently considering whether it is open to him to write to the authorities of the Polytechnic of North London pointing out that, although they do not control the funding of their students' union, they have a responsibility under the Articles of Association to ensure that the monies made available to it are spent in ways consistent with its charitable status.

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The use made by students' unions, however, of the public funds allocated to them has been the subject of a number of complaints, all of which are carefully investigated. Keith is in fact currently pursuing a complaint by the Federation of Conservative Students about the activities of the students' union at Bradford University which could give rise to further advice being given to institutions generally on the conflict between certain activities of students' unions and their charitable status. Not all unions have such status, although those of the London Polytechnics do. I realise that some of the public money made available goes on sabbatical officers with the consequences in many cases which you describe. I know that Keith is considering the options.

I am glad to be kept in touch with the progress of the NCEA's research on examination results. I know that Keith Joseph and Rhodes Boyson look forward to seeing what the Council's report has to say.

Finally, I was most interested to read your comments on our consultation document on the proposed review body for nurses, midwives and professions allied to medicine. You have rightly raised some very important issues in relation to our proposals, but I am sure you will understand if I do not enter into a discussion whilst they are out for consultation. Nevertheless I will ensure that Norman Fowler receives a copy of your note and is therefore able to take it into account when considering the outcome of the consultation process.

Kind regards,

Yours sincerely

Raymond White

The Baroness Cox