



The Baroness Cox

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The Prime Minister
10 Downing Street,
London SW1

September 1 1988

Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing to say a belated "Thank You" for all your encouragement and support over our endeavours in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords to try to ensure that religious education and worship in schools respect Christianity as the main spiritual tradition of this land, while at the same time respecting the rights of those of other faiths.

The delay in writing this letter of appreciation is because I have only just returned from taking a truckload of medical supplies to Poland. However, I know that my colleagues in the House of Commons, as well as my fellow peers, were fortified during our battles in our respective Houses by the knowledge that you were with us in spirit and by your helpful reply at Question Time.

I believe that the final amendments, eventually put forward by the Bishop of London, although lengthy and convoluted, will provide a framework in which Christians and those of other faiths will be able to develop religious education and worship true to the spirit of Christianity and the other major religions.

I have already heard from local clergy that many are being invited into schools to which they were previously denied access. It is now up to teachers, parents and the Churches to take advantage of the legislative opportunities which we have been able to provide.

Just before I close, may I return for a moment to Poland. During my visit this time, I was as shocked and saddened as I always am, especially by the the appalling shortages of medicines and medical equipment and by the deterioration in the health of the people. I enclose, hoping you might have a moment to glance at them, copies of a letter I have just written to 'The Times' and of the report on my visit. I do so, because I know that the Polish people are desperate for aid from the West, but that they would also appreciate some linkage with conditions concerning political and economic change. Might I also mention, without sounding impudent, their hope that you, as someone for whom they have the deepest admiration, will not sound too enthusiastic over 'glasnost' - a concept for which they sadly have a bitterly realistic scepticism.

Thank you again for all your support on the important issues concerning religious education and worship in our schools.

With very best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Caroline Cox.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Preparations for next carnival

From Mr Dudley Fishburn, MP for Kensington (Conservative)

Sir, Notting Hill's carnival turned out to be uneventful but fun (except for those poor residents whose homes lie along the route). Large quantities of egg should be seen on the faces of those who predicted trouble, often with a certain amount of glee.

London's blacks have no desire for it. What they want, and are increasingly if belatedly getting, are jobs without prejudice, fair policing, and a stake in Britain's new-found prosperity. Unfortunately, many black leaders (some of whom declared the carnival a tinderbox) are dogmatically aligned to the left of the Labour Party. They are like the trades union bosses of a decade ago, full of fire, but the troops have gone off in a different direction.

The task of the carnival the morning after is to set its house in order. The organisation needs to be registered as a charity with proper accounts, with new blood from the local black business community, with more commercial sponsorship for the bands (well done, ICI) and with a year-round black chief executive.

There was disappointment at the missed chance that a well-run carnival would have given to inject some prosperity into one of the least-advantaged pockets in London. Carnival is the legitimate focus of black aspiration and celebration. It deserves an organisation fit for that role.

Yours sincerely,
DUDLEY FISHBURN,
House of Commons.
August 30.

Snowdonia pipeline

From Mr T. Mervyn Jones

Sir, As a former public gas man I am loath to enter into controversy with the public CEBG. But the record demands I do.

In the mid-1950s we of the then responsible Wales Gas Board laid a high-pressure gas pipeline along the North Wales coast. It went inland through some of the loveliest scenery in the Snowdonia National Park. It was so effectively buried, lost to sight without trace, that we had to

Perils of living beyond our means

From Mr H. E. Wall

Sir, At the age of 85 I remember all too well the terrible depression and unemployment of the late twenties and early thirties. In some respects we seem to be in a similarly precarious economic situation today, except that some business people and politicians, "whistling in the dark", try to cheer us up with news of an economic boom. Of course the "spending spree" produces an air of prosperity.

It seems to me, however, that the economic and industrial collapse of the twenties and thirties was due partly to a reckless dependence on the extension of credit through the developing acceptance of the hire-purchase system by an inexperienced public, including a business community assuming that the demand for goods, stimulated by this new system of buying by hire-purchase would go on increasing. Too much credit, then as now, encouraged industrialists to be over-optimistic about the prospects of expansion.

I suggest that, with the fashion now so widely followed of the use of credit cards, the present boom in the economy is a false one. The frightening gap between exports and imports just announced should be a grim warning.

All right, say I'm old-fashioned, that I'm in my second childhood, but Charles Dickens and his Mr Micawber had a point. We as a nation are living beyond our means. We are not sufficiently mature or educated in economics. Credit cards can promote short-term prosperity, but, used too optimistically, this new fashion is a path leading to an economic precipice.

Yours faithfully,
H. E. WALL,
Pennyfarthings,
Wistanstow,
Craven Arms, Shropshire.
August 25.

From Mr T. W. Kent

Sir, Once again the mortgage interest rate looks set to rise. Base levels of 13 and 14 per cent are envisaged which will no doubt cause mayhem to many people who borrowed at less than 10 per cent. Why is it the consumer who always has to bear the inadequacies of the providers when it comes to money matters?

Since my wife and I decided in

tically impossible to stop them. The better solution, surely is to encourage private savings.

A new issue of National Savings Certificates at very attractive rates is one way savings could be encouraged. I should like to suggest an additional attraction. In spite of Government protestations that there has been considerable increased spending in real terms, public opinion seems to favour much greater expenditure on the health service.

A special issue of "health service bonds", with the money so raised to be dedicated to increased expenditure on our hospitals, is a convenient solution. Although only much smaller sums could realistically be involved, other institutions, such as the Arts Council or the Sports Council could benefit by similar issues.

Such bond issues should not upset the Chancellor's overall strategy on taxation and public expenditure. On the contrary, they should encourage investment where people want to see it most rather than wasting our current prosperity on a flood of imported consumer goods.

Yours faithfully,
SIMON KVERNDAL,
48 Ebury Street, SW1.

From Mr P. M. Ingman

Sir, Over the past few months charge and credit card companies have reported record borrowings from their card holders. This, I understand, is the main driving force behind the consumer boom.

I also understand that most credit cards have a rule that a minimum of 5 per cent of the outstanding balance be paid back in any one month. If this level was increased to say 25 per cent of the outstanding balance, I am sure this would soon put a stop to the over-use of credit-cards for consumer purchases and bring about the reduction in the consumer boom that the Government so desires.

Interest rates could then be lowered to the benefit of industry, without the knock-on effect of stimulating a consumer boom and hence inflation.

Yours faithfully,
P. M. INGMAN,
27 Braeside Avenue,
Sevenoaks, Kent.
August 26.

Charitable needs on Continent

From Baroness Cox

Sir, I have just taken a truckload of medical supplies to Poland. The situation there is catastrophic. Many essential medicines and items of equipment are frequently not available, including antibiotics, analgesics, cytotoxic drugs, incubators for the new-born, respirators for intensive care, and innumerable small but crucial items such as needles, syringes, surgical gloves, cotton wool, incontinence pads . . . the list is too long to print. In one major city, surgeons could not operate because there were no intravenous fluids.

Health problems are exacerbated by environmental pollution: healthy foods, such as fruit, are often prohibitively expensive; many children suffer from vitamin deficiency, but mothers in Warsaw were recently advised not to give children carrot juice because carrots are polluted by chemicals.

In several cities unhealthy food and working conditions are reflected in dramatic increases in pathological births; in one major city a recent study found no mother with a normal placenta. At the other end of life, life expectancy for men has recently dropped from 70 to 65.

Medical Aid for Poland Fund (MAPF) saves many lives. This was its 185th truck; its total aid over the past few years now exceeds £10 million. Great care is taken to ensure that the aid reaches those most in need. But, like all charities, it runs on faith and a shoestring.

Would it be possible for a tiny fraction of ODA (Overseas Development Administration) resources to be given to charities such as MAPF which take aid to countries on the European Continent, whose health needs now resemble those of developing countries? This would be a humane and efficient use of resources; it would also be a much-valued symbolic support to fellow-Europeans to whom we owe so much, both historically and culturally.

Yours faithfully,
CAROLINE COX,
House of Lords.
August 23.

DRAFT REPORT ON TRUCK 185 TO KIELCE.

Destination: Kielce.

Route: Olszyna/Kielce.

Escort: Caroline Cox.

1. TRANSPORT:

Contractor: M & S Shipping;

Driver: Pekaes: Peter.

Truck: 32 tonnes.

2. CONTENTS:

a) Medicines: included antibiotics; drugs for cardio-vascular, central nervous system, respiratory, gastro-intestinal, metabolic & dermatological disorders; analgesics; vitamins.

Total value of drugs: £12,887.

b) Equipment: included intravenous infusion administration sets; needles; syringes; cannulae; sutures; surgical gloves; urinary & colostomy bags; catheters; respirators; defribillators; incubators; resuscitation 'disaster' sets; surgical dressings & instruments; crutches; hospital beds.

Total value of equipment: £49,024.

c) Special Foods: Infant milk powder; low protein flour mix; soy milk.

Total value of special foods: £1,232.

d) Medical Journals.

Total value of journals: £2,950.

e) Soap & Other Goods: soap powder; baby bottles; nappies; clothes; shoes.

Total value of soap: £997.

Total Value of Consignment: £67,090.00.

3. THE HEALTH SITUATION IN POLAND.

As my visit occurred during the holiday season, I was unable to meet many friends and colleagues who usually arrange visits and provide information on health needs. However, I did have the opportunity for some discussions & I regret to report that, as on previous occasions, the first words I heard were "Worse" and "Deteriorating". Not only are the shortages of medicines & equipment as acute as ever, but the health problems of the Polish people are being exacerbated by shortages of healthy foods, by unhealthy working conditions & by widespread pollution.

a) Morbidity & Mortality.

Life expectancy is falling, especially for men. The average life span for men has reverted to the figures of the 1950s; it is now only 64 compared with a previous figure of 69.

Cardio-vascular disease is an acute & widespread problem: Poland is said to have the highest proportion of young men with cardio-vascular disease of any country in the world which keeps reliable statistics. Contributory factors include stress, pollution, smoking & unhealthy diet.

Although the life expectancy for women has not, as yet, deteriorated to the same extent as that for men, their health is also seriously impaired by similar factors. Among the pathological manifestations of the unhealthy living conditions in Poland today, for women, is the very high number of women with abnormal placentas. For example, in Lodz, the number of women having spontaneous abortions or giving birth to children with congenital defects has risen dramatically.

A related problem for women is the increase in infertility, especially in

women working in unhealthy conditions in industrial areas such as the textile industries.

One encouraging statistic is a recent drop of 1% in the Infant Mortality Rate, although it is still higher by a factor of about 2 compared with Western European countries. It was suggested that one reason for this improvement may be the exceptionally cold winter which may have killed many viruses & other sources of infection.

A particularly disturbing development is the increase in neoplastic diseases, especially carcinoma of the lung. Oncologists have predicted an 90% increase by 1990, as compared with 1986. Clearly, pollution, smoking & stress are all contributory factors.

Pollution & the Effect on Nutrition & Health. Pollution is reaching catastrophic levels in many parts of Poland: now 27 of the 49 regions in Poland have been declared Regions of Environmental Disaster. 7 of these regions are deemed to be especially catastrophic - worse than anywhere else in the world. In some areas, especially around Copper & Steel Works, local people are not allowed to use the soil, because of the high levels of heavy metals. In some areas, eggs cannot be eaten because they contain toxic levels of these heavy metals.

One example of the damaging effects of pollution on nutrition & health concerns vitamin deficiency: mothers in the Warsaw area have been told they should not give their children carrot juice because the carrots have been rendered too toxic by soil pollution: either by chemicals from industry or by excessive use of chemical fertilizers. In some places, the lead content is 100 times above acceptable safety levels; in a few places it is 1000 times above normal levels.

Clearly, the environmental devastation is exacerbating the already serious health problems caused by shortages of healthy food, unhealthy working conditions & inadequate medical supplies. A particularly worrying feature is the long-term damage caused by such pollution which may be difficult to reverse: some harmful effects, such as the projected increase in neoplastic disease, are expected to manifest themselves in the next few years; others, such as congenital defects will affect the next generation - or even several generations to come.

b) Shortages of Medicines & Equipment.

The endemic shortages of basic medicines & equipment are aggravated by inefficient & erratic distribution. For example, in Warsaw, shortages are as serious as ever, but Kielce & other provincial areas do not receive some of even those supplies which are available in Warsaw. Sometimes, medicines are available on an erratic basis, or are delivered too late to treat a particular patient, which makes treatment difficult or impossible.

Medicines:

Cytotoxic drugs for the treatment of patients with Cancer are in desperately short supply or virtually non-existent. This means that one vital part of the triad of treatment for cancer - chemotherapy - cannot be used. One doctor told me of the heartbreaking results of this absence of chemotherapy. For example, young patients with osteosarcomas have to have Excessively mutilating amputations because there are no cytotoxic drugs for treatment of malignant tumours; & even then they cannot receive treatment for metastases which might respond to chemotherapy. Thus unlike patients in

the West who can respond well to the full range of treatments for this kind of neoplasm, Poles are denied one essential part of it, resulting in unnecessary mutilation, suffering & death.

Cardio-vascular drugs are in short supply & are available only on an irregular & erratic basis.

Analgesic drugs are also often limited in availability. Phentanyl is now being produced in Poland, but its quality is not very good. Paediatric analgesics are urgently required.

Anaesthetic drugs are not adequately available. For example, there is an acute shortage of muscle relaxants.

Immunosuppressive drugs are not often available, resulting in unnecessary deaths from rejection of transplanted organs. Even when some drugs are available, they tend to be outdated; therefore they are not very effective & cause serious side-effects.

There is a perennial & desperate shortage of antibiotics.

Vitamins, much needed to help to remedy the dietary insufficiencies mentioned above, are also not available to many who need them.

Medical equipment.

As always, there are repeated reports of endemic shortages of even the most basic medical & nursing equipment.

Needles & syringes: Poland only produces 15-20% of its own requirements & is therefore heavily dependent on Western aid for the remaining 80-85%. The acute shortages in many areas mean that medical & nursing staff have to re-use disposable needles & syringes with the inevitable risks involved. These are reflected in increases in serious diseases like Hepatitis.

Other basic equipment in desperately short supply include cannulae,

surgical gloves, Venflon, cotton wool & other requirements for surgical dressings.

Larger items of equipment which are not available include essential items such as respirators & incubators. For example, in the Children's Hospital in Kielce, the Resuscitation ward has 6 beds, but only 2 respirators. Also, there is no transport incubator available so that premature or ill babies who need to be transferred to the Hospital, perhaps from areas 60 or 70 miles away, often arrive suffering from hypothermia.

Essential Foods.

The desperate shortage of baby food continues. Infant milk powder is often just not available. On some occasions, the only milk available has been found to be bacteriologically dangerous.

Meat is generally rationed to 2.5 kg per month, with only 1 kg being 'off the bone'. More rations are allowed for some categories of people such as those working in heavy industries. Fresh fruit & vegetables are often prohibitively expensive (in Warsaw last winter I saw a lemon on a market stall priced at £12). As already mentioned, some nutritious food is contaminated by chemical pollution. Consequently, there is an urgent need for vitamin supplements, especially for children, the elderly & other vulnerable groups; but vitamin preparations are often not available.

Conclusion

On this visit I was not able to obtain as much detailed & statistical information as usual. I hope that some will be sent to me later by post. However, the information I did receive confirms the same tragic story of previous visits & I am sure that more statistical data would show more of the same picture: a picture of appalling shortages resulting in unnecessary suffering & death. For the Polish health care professionals who have the

knowledge & skill to provide treatment comparable in sophistication to that provided by their professional colleagues in the West, the situation is heartbreaking.

As one medical colleague said: "It is a scandal that in a civilised society, people should die innecessarily."

Although the supplies from MAPF are inevitably only a drop in the ocean of need, they do save many lives. They are desperately needed & received with poignant gratitude. Therefore the messages which I was asked to bring back from Poland this time are:

"Please do not let the West forget us, or let us down again" and:

"PLEASE HELP US. As the famous proverb says: "Whoever saves one life, saves the whole world."

MAPF cannot save the whole world, but we can & do save lives & alleviate suffering. Sadly, the demand for our help is as great, or even greater, than ever.

Caroline Cox,

August 23 1988.



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briefing?
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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

5 September 1988

The Prime Minister has asked me to thank you for your letter of 1 September which she was very glad to have. She will reflect carefully on your suggestion about Poland.

(C. D. POWELL)

The Baroness Cox

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