

MPs call for Catholic schools to be given greater freedoms to discriminate in admissions

Posted: Thu, 1st May 2014

A number of Conservative MPs have called on the Government to scrap the 50% cap on faith based admissions to free schools, to give Catholic schools greater freedoms to discriminate on religious grounds.

Faith based free schools' admissions criteria must allow for 50% of places to be allocated to children without reference to faith if the school is oversubscribed. This is supposed to ensure that such schools provide places for the broader local community.

In a [Westminster Hall debate](#) on Wednesday 30 April, Damian Hinds MP, who attended a Catholic grammar school in Cheshire, called on the Department for Education to consider a pilot of a Catholic free school without the 50% cap.

Mr Hinds said the view that all publicly funded schools should be equally open to all "misses the point" of what makes Catholic schools distinctive. He argued that if Catholic schools were open to all they would "lose their distinctive character — not immediately, but over time."

Their "specialness", argued Mr Hinds, "comes at least partly as a direct result of their religious nature."

Mr Hinds argued that Catholic schools deserved special treatment because they had proven themselves to be diverse by already having a substantial proportion of non-Catholic children.

The proportion of non-Catholic children at Catholic schools is around 30%.

Despite describing the 50% faith based admissions cap as "well-intentioned" due to concerns about diversity, inclusiveness and mixing in schools, Mr Hinds said he was concerned that it "precludes the creation of Catholic free schools, because the Catholic Church feels unable to support, with all the implications of commitment that that brings".

He questioned why faith has been "singled out" for limits, apparently unaware that all other forms of discrimination based on protected characteristics are unlawful – and that faith based discrimination is only possible at all because faith schools have special exemptions from equalities legislation.

Dr Thérèse Coffey, Conservative MP for Suffolk Coastal praised the Government for resisting amendments (advocated by the National Secular Society) which attempted to remove selection based on faith during the passage of the Academies Act 2010.

She said she would like a change of Government policy, and urged Catholic schools and priests, and the Catholic Education Service, to keep the pressure up to remove the 50% cap.

Labour MP Kevin Brennan said his party "strongly supports faith schools in our state education system", but reiterated a statement from Tristram Hunt, the shadow Secretary of State for

education, who said it was right that there are duties on taxpayer funded faith schools "to participate positively in the family of schools in their area and to ensure that they have a fair admissions policy."

Responding on behalf of the Government, David Laws MP, Minister of State for Schools, said: "Schools must be set up to serve the needs of the wider community, not simply the faith need." He said the Government "wanted to ensure that at least 50% of places in new provision free schools and academies with a religious designation are not allocated on the basis of faith but are accessible by the local community to children who are of the faith, of a different faith or of none."

But Mr Laws also said there was "a lot of scope for Catholic schools to play a big role in the education system" and urged them to play a full part in expanding education provision in areas with a shortage of school places "to meet basic need".

The Minister of State for Schools, added; "I think that our faith is at its best when it reaches out to people beyond the faith, and I urge the Catholic faith in this country not to think of itself as providing schools to serve only people of the Catholic faith. In a society where all religions seem to be struggling to keep people engaged", said Mr Laws, "faiths such as Catholicism should welcome the fact that many parents want their children to attend those schools even if they are not of the faith."

Stephen Evans, campaigns manager at the National Secular Society, said: "In schools, as in wider society, we should be ensuring that nobody is treated less favourably because of their religion or belief. Religious discrimination is a blight on our education system and any calls for more discrimination to be permitted goes to show how out of step the Catholic Church is. Unfortunately, like the Church, our education system appears to be stuck in a time warp. Despite seismic changes in society, successive governments have paved the way for ever greater religious control of education. That position needs to be urgently reassessed."

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