

Conservative MP criticises division caused by faith schools

Posted: Thu, 10th Nov 2016

A debate in the House of Commons on the role of faith and grammar schools saw MPs quiz the Government over its plans to remove the 50% cap on faith-based selection to new faith-based free schools.

Dr Sarah Wollaston MP, who has criticised Government plans to allow more discrimination in the admissions arrangements of new faith schools, asked the chair of the Education Select Committee Neil Carmichael MP if he shared her concerns about the proposals.

"Can he think of a single reason why the child of an atheist parent like myself should be excluded from a school because of their parents' lack of faith? Does he also share my concern that 100% selection by faith risks driving communities into further segregation and does nothing to improve social cohesion?"

Mr Carmichael replied that "we must have an inclusive society; we cannot parcel people up".

Dr Wollaston has strongly opposed the proposals, saying they have "nothing to contribute to a more integrated and cohesive society".

Keith Vaz MP, said faith schools can be a "powerful force for integration" and praised Leicester's Catholic, Hindu, Sikh and Muslim schools.

"It is important that if parents wish to send their children to faith schools, they are allowed to do so", he insisted.

Caroline Spelman MP, representing the Church of England in the House of Commons, defended faith-based education and urged colleagues and "the secular world" to remember that "faith schools offer a great deal to people of all faiths and none."

Responding for the Government, Nick Gibb MP, Minister of State for School Standards, said that the admissions cap which was "designed to promote inclusion by limiting the proportion of pupils that oversubscribed new faith free schools can admit on the basis of faith, has not worked to combat segregation."

Stephen Evans, campaigns director of the National Secular Society, said: "If the Government was serious about tackling segregation and religious discrimination it would start by ensuring that all new schools are fully inclusive and equally welcoming to all children, irrespective of their religious backgrounds. Instead, it is planning to open more faith schools and increase the extent to which they can discriminate in admissions.

"Meanwhile it has come up with no meaningful way of tackling the dreadful religious and ethnic segregation that the growth of minority faith schools is exacerbating."

This week the National Secular Society met with Department for Education officials and urged them to advise ministers to abandon plans to allow full religious discrimination in school admissions.

[Read our briefing on the proposed changes to faith-based admissions and new faith-based academies.](#)

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