

Government to work with Church of England to promote more religious schools

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During Education Questions in the House of Commons on Monday, Michael Gove, the Education Secretary (for England) intimated that the Government is working with the Church of England to bring about its ambition to open hundreds more church schools.

The recently published Chadwick report from the CofE called for a new "concordat" between the Church and the Government that would "reinforce and enhance" the Church's influence throughout the education system. This now seems to have been granted, as was evident from an orchestrated exchange in the Commons initiated by Tony Baldry, the Conservative MP for Banbury and Second Church Estates Commissioner – effectively the CofE's place man in the Commons.

He asked the Education Secretary: "Has my right hon. Friend had the opportunity to read the report, chaired by Priscilla Chadwick, on the future of Church of England schools? Does he agree that the recent changes in education introduced by the Government provide opportunities for the continuing involvement of the Church of England in education, particularly in delivering distinctive and inclusive new academies?"

Michael Gove replied: "I absolutely agree. Education on both sides of the border was driven in the first instance by the vigorous missionary activity of Churches, and we praise and cherish the role of the Church of England in making sure that children have an outstanding and inclusive education. I welcome the report, and I look forward to working with Bishop John Pritchard to extend the role of the Church in the provision of schools."

No space in this love-in to question whether these new CofE academies would be inclusive, as Tony Baldry claims in his self-serving puff. Converting Church schools that are Voluntary Aided (not local authority controlled) will be able to recruit 100% of their pupils from families of the faith. (Mr Gove has a very curious attitude to inclusiveness. He has also said that religiously designated free schools technically limited to admitting no more than 50% of pupils on the basis of denomination or faith are not obliged to recruit the remainder from other denominations or faiths, giving the green light to them being 100% mono faith academies.)

Mr Gove's praise for the churches' missionary activity on both sides of the border ignored its primary purpose, to recruit followers rather than to educate. Nor did he, predictably, acknowledge that in the first half of the nineteenth century the Church opposed universal education altogether and even as late as 1870 still opposed the emergence of public education provided independently from the Church.

In praising the CofE for "outstanding ... education", Mr Gove overlooks that the generally better achievements of Church schools come from the privilege they have of being able to select pupils, leaving the unchosen – the less supported and generally harder to teach children - to the community schools, which in the circumstances do remarkably well. The more such selective schools or academies there are, the harder will be the job of those in community schools or non-religious academies. If this is taken to its extreme and all schools become religious schools, there would be no privileged pool and performance would rapidly even out.

Conspicuous by its absence from this push for ever more Church schools is an acknowledgement that CofE attendance is declining at a rate likely to compromise its survival as a national institution, and forcing a growing proportion of non-religious parents, probably already a majority, to have their children attend a religious school when they would prefer otherwise. The more children abandon church and Sunday school, the more determined Mr Gove seems to be to force them back. For both parents and pupils, these moves detract from choice, on which this Government purports to be so keen.

Keith Porteous Wood

Keith Porteous Wood is the president (and former executive director) of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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