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# **Community Cohesion and Migration Inquiry**

Response to Call for Evidence from the  
National Secular Society to the  
Communities and Local Government  
Committee.

Submitted 18 January 2008.

## Introduction

The National Secular Society was founded in 1866 and is the principal organisation representing the rights of the non-religious. It is a human rights organisation dedicated to promoting equality and fighting discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. We campaign for public life blind to religion.

We believe that a secularist approach in which all religions and beliefs flourish and none is privileged is not only necessary for equality but also promotes cohesion and integration, especially of incomers due to migration. The Commission on Integration and Cohesion ("COIC")'s report entitled *Our Shared Future* refers (Chap. 7) to the principle of visible social justice. We consider that secularism is such a system which, by its transparent equality, helps build trust in the institutions that arbitrate between groups. Not only do we advocate its positive benefits in its own right but we stress that this approach, which gives all members of society confidence of equal status, can prevent fears of perceived unfair allocation of resources, one of COIC's areas of concern in its report (Chap. 2.46-49).

This submission to the Call for Evidence by the Communities and Local Government Committee concentrates on two main aspects of promoting cohesion in the context of migration, first schools and education and secondly, the current undue emphasis on religion and interfaith initiatives to address problems of cohesion and integration.

## Schools and Education

One of the definitions of an integrated and cohesive community identified in Chap 3.15 of *Our Shared Future* is that there are "strong and positive relationships between people of different backgrounds in ...schools..." We agree. In our view, the most direct way to achieve this is to have a secular system of state education in which schools do not select either pupils or staff on the basis of their religious affiliation and do not have religious character (which must by its single and preferential status emphasise differences rather than shared values). We are particularly concerned that the growth in minority faith schools will work against integration and that this is especially harmful in areas where the minority faith is largely represented by a single ethnic or cultural group. Integrated schools which serve all the local community will avoid the creation of religious "ghettoes" which foster isolation at best, and at worst, mutual ignorance and suspicion.

We are aware that faith schools are under a duty to promote cohesion and that it is alleged that this may be achieved by such mechanisms as the School Linking Network, "twinning" (as mentioned for example in *Our Shared Future* Chapter 8) and joint extra-curricular activities. The need for this artificial response to a created problem is no solution to the underlying separation of communities, and indeed, some evidence suggests that these efforts may be counter-productive. We refer the Committee to the research of Prof. Irene Bruegel of London South Bank University which shows that integration in schools is much less effective unless started at primary level, that initiatives such as twinning do not

overcome the problems that non-integrated schools create and can be counter-productive. More detail is shown in Appendix A.

The context of the Committee's Call for Evidence is the impact of migration and the introduction of new communities. The NSS is particularly concerned that the arrival of new groups may result in local authorities increasing the number of faith schools or places available at existing faith schools without objective evidence that these are justified. We are concerned that insufficient attention has been given to the projected drop in pupil numbers over the next decade. Demographics are a key factor in whether a new school is needed at all, far less it being a church school. The startling projected reduction in the number of teenagers came up during the passage of the Education and Inspections Bill through Parliament on 28 March 2006:

*"There is about to be a period of 10 years of falling school rolls. We expect schools to lose about 500,000 teenagers in the next 10 years."* (Sarah Teather MP, Lib Dem Education spokesperson Standing Committee E, Column 62).

This throws into doubt the need to open new schools except in areas with large growth of young people, and the need to consider closing schools. An increase in numbers of state school places available in faith schools will create a relatively higher proportion of these non-integrated schools than at present. We are concerned not only that there will be a disparity in the form of an oversupply of places in faith schools relative to demand but also that this could be perceived as an unfair allocation of resources by those who choose but who do not obtain their preferred type of school, especially where that choice was for an community school. This can only be harmful for integration and cohesion.

Each broad type of religious school – CofE if oversubscribed, RC and minority faith) will tend to bring about a deterioration in cohesion:

- **CofE schools if oversubscribed** are likely to have a lower than average proportion of children entitled to Free School Meal, lower ability pupils and a higher proportion of above average ability pupils. This results from their privileged admissions arrangements\*.  
\* Per *Religious Schools in London: School Admissions, Religious Composition and Selectivity?* Paper presented to British Educational Research Association Conference in London on 7th September 2007. Compiled by Rebecca Allen, Institute of Education, University of London and Anne West, Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science.
- **RC schools** as Voluntary Aided schools of a religious character are not obliged to teach about other religions or of non-religious philosophical perspectives
- **Minority faith schools** are likely to be highly mono-ethnic, mono-cultural as well as mono-religious. The communities from which pupils in these schools may already be separated from the mainstream. The establishment of such schools is also likely to cause the transfer of minority faith children out of other schools where they are contributing to the diversity. Even if such schools have a nominally open admissions

policy, the likelihood of any significant take up by those of another religion or none is remote in the extreme. Nor would it be regarded as politically feasible to require children outside the minority faith to be educated there, especially if (as will often be the case) there is a uniform policy requiring, for example, a veil. In essence therefore the more schools of this type that are opened, the more apartheid will characterise the maintained education sector.

The NSS believes that an entirely secular state education system is one of the single most efficient ways to promote integration and cohesion by bringing people into contact with different groups from an early age on. The recent expansion of minority faith schools, especially where this has implications for simultaneous racial segregation, has not merely continued an unhelpful trend but has exacerbated the situation. We urge the Committee to oppose the state sponsored segregation in schools and in particular to oppose creation of new minority faith state schools.

## **Undue Emphasis on Religious and Inter-faith Initiatives**

The NSS recognises valuable work done by religious and interfaith groups in promoting good relations and cohesion. We are concerned, however, that central and local government, in seeking to harness the resources of such groups create new problems and fail to appreciate that this approach is divisive and can be coercive, factors which will militate against the effectiveness of the strategy for the purposes of integration and cohesion. This is particularly important in the context of migration when assumptions may be made as to the religion or belief of migrants based on cultural, racial or geographical background. True cohesion should be based on accurate identities and a broad brush approach can lead to an unwarranted conflation of religion and, for example, race. This can be counter-productive.

Firstly, such an approach is not comprehensive. Faith and interfaith initiatives will fail to serve many in society, not just the non-religious, but also, for example,

- those who identify themselves as religious mainly or solely for cultural reasons;
- those who are not observant or active members of the relevant bodies of their faith;
- those who are religious but who do not live in conformity with official doctrine;
- those who are afraid to declare their true religious status.

These groups will often include vulnerable groups, for example women and gay people, who may already be isolated from society in general. Not only are these groups overlooked by an over emphasis on faith and interfaith initiatives, but there is the significant risk that this approach can on occasion trap people in a religious identity when this is not how they choose to be seen principally or at all. For cohesion and integration to take place, the widest possible spectrum of religion and belief must be engaged.

*Our Shared Future* recognises the need for an approach which covers the whole spectrum of religion and belief; it suggests that there needs to be more “conversation between the

religious and the non-religious” (Chap 6.22). The initiatives which have come out of its suggestions so far, however, seem to us to favour instead conversation between religions at the expense of the non-religious. There are a number of recent initiatives and strategies, sometimes prompted in part by *Our Shared Future*, which promote a religious and interfaith approach:

- The current DCLG consultation *Face to Face and Side by Side* which is part of a process to develop a new interfaith strategy
- The various items of research mentioned Introduction para.12 of *Face to Face and Side by Side*
- The Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund “to enhance the capacity of faith communities to play a full part in civil society and build community cohesion” in which the government invested £13.8m
- The current consultation *Principles of representation: A Framework for effective third sector participation in Local Strategic Partnerships* to which the DCLG “encourages faith communities to contribute” (*Face to Face and Side by Side* para.2.28). That reference is not balanced by a call for non-faith communities to contribute.

In practical terms, many aspects of the DCLG’s cohesion policy are aimed at and to be delivered via faith and interfaith vehicles. In our view, no effective policy on integration and cohesion can exclude any significant a proportion of the population, such as the non-religious. The dangers of this approach are also apparent when the downward trend of church attendance is taken into account (see Appendix B).

Even when this approach is justified on the basis that it provides access to “hard to reach” groups, if encouraged to become permanent or better resourced (e.g. via the Capacity Building Fund), this can reinforce isolation and entrench the view, especially for some vulnerable people, that they are required to express their views or access their entitlements via religious channels, or engage with other groups in society via their religious identity. This can be counter-productive for some who might prefer to engage more fully in society on terms of their own choice and in an identity of their own choice.

## Appendix A

From Prof. Irene Bruegel 26 August 2006

### **Submission to the Commission on Cohesion and Integration.**

[Here is a summary of] a report of research on patterns of children’s friendships conducted in 12 English primary schools between 2003 and 2005. The schools varied greatly in ethnic and faith diversity, with as many as 60 of the 600 children surveyed identifying themselves as Muslims.

We found that

- Friendship at primary schools can and does cross ethnic and faith divides wherever children have the opportunity to make friends from different backgrounds
- At that age, in such schools, children are not highly conscious of racial differences and are largely unaware of the religion of their friends.
- That the positive benefits of mixed primary schooling particularly for white children, extend into the early years of secondary school. They were more likely to make new friends from a different background, were more aware of racial discrimination
- There was some evidence that parents learned to respect people from other backgrounds as a result of their children's experiences in mixed schools.
- That the ethnic mix of primary schools can vary within local catchment areas and that parental attitudes allied to a rhetoric of choice reduces the chances of children from different backgrounds being in the same primary class.
- In the areas we studied this was particularly true of Catholic schools.
- Muslim children separated school and home more than other children, but their Muslim school friends did not come home with them any more than their other friends.
- The process of secondary school transfer affects behaviour and inter-racial relations as children react to a sense of rejection ( not included in this paper)
- Secondary school transfer processes also tended to disrupt pre-existing inter-ethnic friendships more than others.
- Children in non-denominational secondary schools from all ethnic backgrounds were largely opposed to 'faith' schools.
- In the one case we studied, primary school twinning had little effect on white children's attitudes, fuelling indeed their community's sense of losing out on investment.

Drawing on the large body of research into the social psychology of prejudice, we conclude by arguing that day-to-day contact between children who can more easily see each other as equals has far more chance of breaking down barriers between communities, than school twinning and sporting encounters

We therefore think that if it is to address the questions of integration effectively, the commission

- Has to consider how far policies of enhanced school choice and the retention of existing religious schools have hindered integration
- Has to consider how policies and processes within schools help or hinder the respect and understanding pupils have for one another, with particular regard to the attitudes of white children
- Has to ensure that local examples of school twinning and informal contact are independently and systematically evaluated for their impact on attitudes and behaviour.
- Should systematically evaluate the educational benefits for white children from traditionally poor achieving backgrounds of learning alongside children from high aspiring ethnic groups, asking the question of how some of their achievements might 'rub off' on to their white peers.

The report is posted on London South Bank University's own website:

<http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/families/publications/SCDiversityEdu28.8.06.pdf>

**Appendix B**  
**CHURCH ATTENDANCE TRENDS TO 2040**

SOURCE: UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 5 (2005/2006) Publ 2005 by Christian Research ISBN1-85321-160-5  
 Tables 12.11 and 12.13

<b>Year</b>	<b>GB: &lt;15yo churchgoers (in thousands)</b>	<b>GB Church attendees as % of Pop.</b>
1980	1,553	11.0
1985	1,357	10.2
1990	1,238	9.6
1995	992	8.5
2000	807	7.6
2005	603	6.8
2010	378	6.0
2015	268	5.1
2020	186	4.4
2025	121	3.6
2030	75	3.0
2035	45	2.4
2040	26	2.0