

25 Red Lion Square

London WC1R 4RL

TEL: 020 7404 3126

FAX: 0870 762 8971

EMAIL: [enquiries@secularism.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@secularism.org.uk)

WEB: [www.secularism.org.uk](http://www.secularism.org.uk)

## Liberal Democrat Schools Working Group

# Submission by the National Secular Society to the Consultation on Schools

28 May 2008

**Honorary Associates:** Graham Allen MP Robert Marshall-Andrews QC MP Prof. Peter Atkins Iain Banks  
Lorraine Barrett AM Edward Bond Michael Cashman MEP Colin Challen MP Nick Cohen Prof.  
Richard Dawkins Lord Desai Rt. Hon. Michael Foot Prof. A C Grayling Dr. Evan Harris MP  
Patrick Harvie MSP Christopher Hitchens Paul Holmes MP Prof. Ted Honderich Kelvin Hopkins MP Sir  
Ludovic Kennedy Graham Linehan Baroness Massey of Darwen Lord McIntosh of Haringey Jonathan  
Meades Sir Jonathan Miller Taslima Nasrin Lord O'Neill of Clackmannan Lord Peston Harold Pinter  
Philip Pullman Lord Raglan Claire Rayner Martin Rowson Joan Ruddock MP Joan Smith Dr.  
David Starkey Lord Taverne QC Polly Toynbee Baroness Turner of Camden Gore Vidal Prof. Lord  
Wedderburn of Charlton QC

National Secular Society (Company limited by guarantee. Registered in England No. 1418145)  
Registered Office address shown above

## **Notes on the submission**

*The Director of the NSS, Mr Keith Porteous Wood, is willing to appear in person before the working group if requested.*

*The numbering of points in this submission reflects that of [the consultation paper](#). For convenience we have assembled our recommendations, developed in the main body of this paper, on the next page.*

*Further details on the points made in the paper are available on request.*

*Throughout where 'we' occurs, it refers to the NSS.*

## **The NSS**

The NSS is a human rights-focussed organisation campaigning for equality for all, regardless of religion or belief (which, as the Committee will know, in legal terms, includes lack of belief). This involves seeking to ensure that no single religious group or individual belonging to a particular religious group is privileged above citizens of other religions or none, or that religious groups are not privileged above the non-religious.

Our aims and objectives are laid out in more detail at the end of this submission.

## Summary of Recommendations

*The numbers in brackets refer to questions on consultation paper. The recommendations are repeated below in context.*

1. We recommend the suspension of the opening of any more religious schools or conversions to religious schools, whether of Christian or minority faith. (1 & 2) (shown in both Christian and minority sections)
2. We recommend that the Party follows the advice on how to promote cohesion given by South Bank University under Prof Irene Bruegel (see appendix). (1 & 2)
3. We recommend that all religious discrimination on admissions is outlawed. (1 & 2)
4. We recommend that schools are no longer permitted to be their own admissions authorities. (1 & 2)
5. We recommend that the process of opening schools is made much fairer and open to involve local democracy in an even-handed, well informed and structured way. (1 & 2)
6. We recommend that the terms of reference for school adjudicators be revised to remove inbuilt bias in favour of religious schools and religious school places. (1 & 2)
7. We recommend against school openings or school reorganisations that increase the level of provision of places in schools of a religious character.
8. We recommend that the Liberal Democrats adopt the JCHR's recommendation on Collective Worship and Religious Education for pupils of sufficient maturity as policy and seek to implement it at the earliest legislative opportunity. (6)
9. While RE remains as a subject, we recommend that Voluntary Aided schools are required to follow the locally agreed syllabus for RE, just as Voluntary Controlled schools are. We propose this policy for schools of a religious character, whatever the faith. (6)
10. We recommend the repeal of Sections 58 and 60 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, which we understand is the policy of the Liberal Democrats. It is under these sections that the religious discrimination against school staff is permitted. (61-7)

## 2 What are the key challenges we face on school policy?

### A. Minority Faith Schools

We are very concerned that more and more of our children are attending schools run by minority faith groups. The potential for apartheid is large and growing at a significant rate. The number of active members of minority faiths (excluding approximately half a million non-Trinitarians) is projected to grow from 1.6m in 2005 to 3.5m in 2040<sup>1</sup>. It is likely that the children of many minority non-active faith families will also be expected by their communities to attend minority religious schools. This apartheid is also likely to divide those of the same faith. Of course this is already the case for Protestants and Roman Catholics, especially in Northern Ireland, but sectarianism also remains stubbornly evident in Scotland. Some Jewish schools will admit only children of a particular type of orthodoxy. We can presumably expect similar splits in Islam.

We also find it troubling that private religious schools seem to be lightly supervised and inspected.<sup>2</sup> Not only that, but the government is contemplating, or may have decided to allow, private Muslim schools to form their own independent schools inspectorate<sup>3</sup>. It is not clear why the existing inspectorate seemingly lacks the competence to perform this role, and there are vital issues of independence and transparency to be considered. While the Association of Muslim Schools claims confidently that "Muslim schools consistently outperform local non-faith schools in the league tables", and we do not doubt that some do, there is a troubling frequency of reports of Muslim schools with very serious problems<sup>4</sup>. We have already heard concerns expressed by Ofsted that many of their [Muslim] schools failed to promote tolerance of other cultures.<sup>5</sup> David Bell, the Chief Schools Inspector, said

Britain's diversity has the potential to be one of its greatest strengths. But diverse does not need to mean completely

---

1 UK Handbook Christian Trends No. 5 publ 2005 by Christian Research Table 12.14.1

2 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/03/04/nschool04.xml>: "Half of Muslim schools not inspected"

3 [http://www.ams-uk.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=42&Itemid=1](http://www.ams-uk.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=42&Itemid=1)

4 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1579349/Islamic-school-'kept-copies-of-race-hate-books'.html> and <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/raided-islamic-school-closed-down-435756.html>

5 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/muslim-schools-fail-to-teach-tolerance-ofsted-chief-says-487143.html>

different and it certainly must not mean segregated and separate.

He was unhelpfully denounced as Islamophobic by the Association of Muslim Schools and the Muslim Council of Great Britain.

From the many questions we should like the Government to answer on minority faith schools we have selected the following as examples of our concerns:

- a) Is the current policy of expanding minority faith schools not starting to create educational apartheid that will grow in scale as more such schools open?
  - i. The new schools will be mono-religious as practically no pupils not of the faith will wish to attend them, regardless of whether there is a nominally open admission policy. Even if they did, how welcome would the children feel if, for example, Islamic dress were compulsory – or for that matter, collective worship and religious education too. The Islamia Infant School in Brent has had an open admissions policy for years without any non-Muslim pupils at all.
  - ii. Given that the vast majority of practitioners of minority faiths are themselves of minority ethnicity, such schools will be all-but mono-ethnic and with a very low incidence of majority culture
  - iii. The growing emergence of such schools will reduce the cohesion of existing schools as minority faith schools will take many of their pupils from existing maintained schools with diverse ethnic mixes.
  - iv. That it is not politically credible to offer non-minority faith children the only option of a place in a minority faith school demonstrates that we now have a *de facto* apartheid education system, a fact underlined by the remarks elsewhere about a separate inspection regime.
- b) To what extent will such schools be permitted to exclude those of other sects/denominations of their faith, other faiths and those of no faith, and what steps would be taken to ensure that those of other faiths and none are made welcome? There was talk in 2006 of 25% quotas. If quotas were enforceable, they would perhaps make some contribution towards cohesion. But the opposition from religious leaders, groups and protagonists was so fierce as to threaten a Minister's job. It is therefore

unachievable: another symptom of our minority schools becoming part of a parallel, apartheid, system<sup>6</sup>.

- c) To what extent, if any, will such schools be permitted to restrict the employment of teachers of only one sex?
- d) Will there be a maximum permitted time spent in normal school hours on religious studies or devotions? And what will this be?
- e) We envisage a particular problem with the teaching of sex education. We believe that there will be considerable cultural and/or religious pressure from parents to omit or seriously restrict such education. The state has a responsibility to the pupils to inform them, especially on health and contraception aspects. To what extent will these schools be expected to provide a syllabus of sex education comparable to that in community schools?

Having said all that, we feel some encouragement (luke-warm, admittedly) by points in *Living Apart Together*<sup>7</sup> a Policy Exchange report (2007) on British Muslims and the paradox of multiculturalism:

While 86% of Muslims feel that "my religion is the most important thing in my life", 62% of 16-24 year olds feel they have as much in common with non-Muslims as Muslims, compared to 71% of 55+ year olds. Rather more troubling though is that, despite the severe financial implications, as many as 35% of Muslims would prefer to send their child to an Islamic school, rather than a mixed state school.

Our caveat is, of course, that children of Muslim parents (**not**, please note, 'Muslim children') are treated no differently from other children in state schools.

**We remind the Liberal Democrats that the rash of new schools and academies would be consistent only with a major increase in the number of young people. Yet the reverse is true. Liberal Democrat Education spokesperson Sarah Teather MP told the Commons Standing Committee E on 28 March 2006 that schools will lose about 500,000 teenagers in the next 10 years.**

**There is manifest lack of objectivity in the process of opening schools. The Government claims that they are opened only to satisfy local demand, but very often the consultation is farcical and those opposing such schools have either no opportunity to do so, or even less than was the case a few years ago.**

---

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2006/oct/28/uk.faithschools>

<sup>7</sup> [www.policyexchange.org.uk](http://www.policyexchange.org.uk)

**We recommend that the process of opening schools is made much fairer and open to involve local democracy in an even-handed, well-informed and structured way.**

**We should be considering how to close schools in the best interest of the community as a whole.**

We object to the biased rules that an “adjudicator should not approve proposals for closure where the relevant church SOC group had voted against its closure and it is clear that the closure, in conjunction with any related changes, will reduce the proportion of such denominational places within the LEA, unless it is failing or severely undersubscribed”<sup>8</sup> It would be much less inequitable for the adjudicator to be required to act in the best interests of the pupils as a whole in the area concerned. The injustice is compounded because the number of children from religious families is falling.

**We recommend that the terms of reference for school adjudicators be revised to remove inbuilt bias in favour of religious schools and religious school places.**

We should also be considering much more critically why new schools or school reorganisations are needed, especially if they are a surreptitious way of increasing the proportion of religious school places.

**We recommend the suspension of the opening of any more religious schools or conversions to religious schools, whether of Christian or minority faith.**

**We recommend against school openings or school reorganisations that increase the level of provision of places in schools of a religious character.**

**We recommend that the Party follow the advice given by South Bank University under Prof Irene Bruegel which, after considerable research, recommends, in summary<sup>9</sup> that:**

1. Social cohesion occurs best if children of all backgrounds are educated together in the same school
2. The earlier in the education the better it works – even help bring together parents if the process starts at primary level or earlier. It is markedly less successful for older pupils

---

<sup>8</sup> [www.schoolsadjudicator.gov.uk/upload/STP000219%20Rutland.doc](http://www.schoolsadjudicator.gov.uk/upload/STP000219%20Rutland.doc)

<sup>9</sup> See appendix

3. Remedial initiatives popular with the Government (such as reciprocal visits, joint sports events and correspondence clubs) while being a tacit acknowledgement of the problem, are not only ineffective, they are counter-productive.

## **B. Christian Schools**

The other major area of difficulty relates to Anglican and RC faith schools that discriminate on religious grounds under their (in many cases already privileged) admissions criteria, which they frequently flout in their own interests to the further detriment of community schools<sup>10</sup>. The vast majority of the infractions of the code were by:

- a) Religious schools (e.g. over a hundred by religious schools in Barnet compared with three in community schools).
- b) Schools permitted to be their own admissions authorities, many of which are religious schools

**Confirmation of what opponents of sectarian schools have said for year, has come in new research by Rebecca Allen and Anne West of the LSE on London schools. Their work was reported in a TES article as follows:**

But research published this week [7 September 2007] casts doubt on claims by faith-school leaders that they are serving all sections of society. Rebecca Allen, of London University's Institute of Education, and Anne West, of the London School of Economics, said religious secondaries in London do not serve the most disadvantaged pupils. We have copies of this research on request.

"Overall, religious schools educate a much smaller proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals and their intakes are significantly more affluent than the neighbourhood they are located in," they said.

Some London religious schools may have undergone a distortion of mission as happened with elite public schools, which were set up to educate the poor but then shifted their focus and catered predominantly for the wealthy.

As we have long maintained, religious schools have been cherry-picking the most aspirant pupils, to the disadvantage of struggling community schools.

---

<sup>10</sup> "[M]inisters said that 110 schools were flouting the rules. Of these, 87 were faith schools. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1583780/Faith-schools-'face-witch-hunt-over-admissions'.html>

Interviews may be banned but the ability of religious schools to insist on a 'vicar's certificate' is equivalent to a life-long interview.

**We recommend that all religious discrimination on admissions is outlawed.**

**We recommend that schools are no longer permitted to be their own admissions authorities**

**We recommend the suspension of the opening of any more religious schools or conversions to religious schools, whether of Christian or minority faith.**

## **5 What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current English schools system?**

State-supported schools include at the moment community schools, sectarian schools divided into voluntary controlled, voluntary aided and some academies, grammar schools, trust schools, corporate academies, all in the name of choice. The government is under the illusion that some kind of market competition can be imposed on the school system in order to improve standards. Instead of spurious and confusing choice, most parents would settle for one inclusive, uniform and predictably good school.

We have long maintained that sectarian schools are bound to divide society; that it is both bizarre and unhelpful to select children according to their parents' religion and send them to a school where they are less likely to experience working and playing with children of other religions or none. At some level in their minds, Government ministers may have come to acknowledge this separation in part, since they have recently laid an obligation on all schools to "promote social cohesion"<sup>11</sup> Yet they actively encourage further the growth of sectarian schools, both private and state-supported.

While preparing this Response (14 May 2008) there was further illustration of this incoherence in a *Guardian* report about the United Church Schools Trust which sets up and runs academies (largely at public expense) in an almost independent fiefdom.<sup>12</sup>

The political and religious justification of faith schools is that they are popular and do well. Recent reports, however, have shown what the NSS and other opponents of sectarian schools have always claimed,

---

<sup>11</sup> And worse: a principal method suggested by the government to improve social cohesion has been comprehensively rubbished in a recent (August 2006) study submitted to the Commission on Cohesion and Integration by Prof Irene Bruegel:  
<http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/families/publications/SCDiversityEdu28.8.06.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,,2279516,00.html>

that these schools select their pupils in one way or another to a degree that enables most of them to do well compared with community schools who do not select. And when they are oversubscribed, the religion criterion is paramount.<sup>13</sup>

What is neglected in the argument is the disadvantage to community schools, where there are roughly twice as many pupils. They are at least commensurately disadvantaged, but we suspect the effect is much worse – schools deprived of these promising pupils are likely to pass the tipping point where their less promising pupils (perhaps in behaviour as well as academic ability) pull the average pupils down, instead of the more promising ones spurring them on. A privilege granted here means a social deficit there.

## **6 Questions not asked**

The law requires a daily act of mainly Christian worship in schools, with acknowledgement of other religions, and mandates the teaching of religion.

There is plenty of evidence<sup>14</sup> to support the view that the larger part of the population either has no religion or is not interested in religion, and the trend in unbelief is growing among younger people.<sup>15</sup>

The law insists in effect that large numbers of unbelievers be herded into a religious assembly to 'take part' in worship, not simply to attend or even merely that the religious assembly is provided. This is to bring education authorities into disrepute on the grounds of partiality and authoritarianism. Yes, parents can opt their children out, but there are problems here as things stand at the moment, and while Sixth Form students may now opt themselves out of acts of worship, the same is not true of younger students, or of RE. The Church, however, is happy to accept children of this age for confirmation. There is a serious problem of inequality, then, recognised recently by the cross-party Joint Committee on Human Rights who said in a report<sup>16</sup> that pupils of "sufficient maturity to make up their own minds as to whether they want to participate in

---

13 As, for example, in this recent incident in Scarborough, where a "Buddhist child" was refused entry into the nearest secondary school, run by the Catholic Church:

<http://www.scarborougheveningnews.co.uk/news/Buddhist-mum-in-school-place.4095697.jp>

14 Even from the research done by the church (and there is much more):

<http://www.tearfund.org/webdocs/Website/News/TAM%20Final%20Version%208.5.07.pdf>

15 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1043986.stm>

16 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1956097/Religious-education-classes-%5C'should-be-optional%5C'.html> and

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt200708/jtselect/jtrights/107/10704.htm#a9>

religious education and worship" should be able to choose not to join in with religious activity at school.

**We recommend that the Liberal Democrats adopt the JCHR's recommendation on Collective Worship and Religious Education for pupils of sufficient maturity as policy and seek to implement it at the earliest legislative opportunity.**

Even with this recommendation in place, pupils will have been subject to around ten years of Collective Worship and Religious Education before attaining a right to withdraw themselves. The only situation where this would not apply is where their parents have withdrawn them, and the proposed change in law would not affect pupils withdrawn in this way.

While we accept that children must be taught *about* religions – otherwise many aspects of their future world would be incomprehensible – we do not agree that it need be done in specific lessons. For one thing the fact that a subject is taught in separate lessons lends credence to the beliefs explained in them, more so than if the beliefs were explained in the broader context of other subject matter. For another, separate lessons lend themselves more readily to abuse by those who wish to use them for proselytising, particularly in sectarian schools.

A major reason churches have been so keen to manage schools is to indoctrinate the next generation of believers. Especially with churchgoers declining in number and becoming older on average, there is considerable pressure to find new congregants and schools are part of the mission to find them. Now they are able to do it largely at the public's expense, but there is no reason why taxpayers should fund this. And the religiosity is not just skin deep. Archbishop Rowan Williams insists that "a church school is a church"<sup>17</sup>. In June 2004 David Aaronovitch, the respected columnist, said,

Last autumn, the Archbishop of Canterbury made a speech encouraging schools to hold their own communion and confirmation services. 'The church school,' he said, 'is a church. More is needed in terms of religion in schools than clergy visits and choral services in nearby churches.'

A church school is a church where the congregation is - as school-children are - captive. I've been asleep to this creeping indoctrination. I'm awake now.

The increasingly shrill edicts from Rome are being heeded with increasing fervour, as the Bishop of Lancaster made clear in a

---

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/jun/13/schools.faithschools>

statement to 'his' schools recently. Noticeably absent was any notion that education should open the mind. Nothing is to be taught that departs from the Vatican hard line on sex education or RE. It is called RE in Voluntary Aided schools, but is indistinguishable from RE, and there is no requirement to consider other denominations or faiths. And that hard line on abortion law promulgated by such bishops is shared by only a quarter of Catholics in the pews and a seventh of the population<sup>18</sup>. And it is not just the children of Catholic parents (not that they are all Catholics) who attend these schools, sometimes because they have no alternative.

**While RE remains as a subject, we recommend that Voluntary Aided schools are required to follow the locally agreed syllabus for RE, just as Voluntary Controlled schools are. We propose this policy for schools of a religious character, whatever the faith.**

Their hard lines on contraception and homosexuality are even less in tune with the pews and the country. And we are not surprised to learn that homophobic bullying is worse in 'faith' schools<sup>19</sup>, or that the Archbishop of Birmingham refused in Parliament to agree to specifically tackle homophobic bullying<sup>20</sup>. The public pays all the running costs of these schools and such intransigence is unacceptable.

Of course the religious pay their taxes too, but they (or those affecting piety) have privileged access to many of the third of schools which are religious, which the non-religious (those not prepared to lie about it) do not.

## **7 How can parents engage more effectively in their children's education?**

One can imagine shudders in school staff rooms everywhere at this proposal. Any such engagement has to be within clearly defined limits to avoid treading on professional toes and to maintain the clarity and integrity of the curriculum.

There is the danger, particularly in sectarian schools, that parental 'engagement' would soon become interference, such as in the subject areas of sex education and PSE as we have mentioned above. It is important that the religious beliefs of parents should not

---

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/news/pr/2007/documents/YouGovPoll\\_16-Nov-2007.pdf](http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/news/pr/2007/documents/YouGovPoll_16-Nov-2007.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Seventy five per cent of young gay people in faith schools experience homophobic bullying and are less likely than pupils in other schools to report it (Stonewall, The School Report 2007)

<sup>20</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6171977.stm>

negate the efforts of teachers to give full information and allow proper discussion of these matters. Although parents may quote human rights legislation to the effect that they are entitled to educate their children according to their beliefs, this legislation neglects the rights of the child in this respect, the right to complete understanding. Parental faith should not trump knowledge, and should not cancel the human rights of the children, especially older ones.

In an example known to one of our volunteers, the head of a community school had to override the objections to IT of guardians of one student to enable him take computer lessons. Since the devil resides in televisions, they argued, and computers use TV screens ...

## **8-16 Educational equality and disadvantage**

To begin with, some remarks more specifically on q. 13 (performance differences between sexes and ethnic groups):

There are assumptions behind this question which need to be examined; the word 'gap' already prejudices the issue.

As for the differences between ethnic groups: often the ethnic differences coincide with differences in cultural attitudes towards education, and the varying appeal of curriculum content between cultures. This has long been apparent in the native population: for example, the antipathy of many in the North East of England to standard schooling is notorious. An excessive attention to religion can also be expected often to detract from attention paid to education.

As for inequalities inherent in the current system of schools:

The Government has repeatedly shown favour to religious bodies in formulating its education policies.

Full confirmation of the Government's collusion with religious bodies in these matters came in September 2007 with the publication of *Faith in the System*. We have put together a thorough critique of this breathtakingly selective document, which is available separately, but we reproduce the overview here in a different font.

### **Overview of *Faith in the System***

The aim of the religious bodies complicit in preparing this document is not so much openly admitted but assumed from the start as being a Good Thing – to work from privileged positions in a state-funded school system to recruit more adherents.

For its part the Government simultaneously acknowledges – though not in so many words – the divisive nature of sectarian education and lays an obligation on all schools to promote community cohesion, using methods that have been shown to be ineffective. (See elsewhere in the submission for more on this)

Prominent places in boxed sidebars are given to individual model schools of a religious nature to boast of their ecumenical outreach activities, in the hope that the reader will assume that all religious schools will develop in this way. But even here there are questions to answer, or things left unsaid by these schools.

Reference is made more than once to the legitimate aspirations of believers, who are granted special privileges because of their beliefs, but the legitimate aspirations of the, by now, non-religious majority are not thought worth mentioning. In spite of the growth in unbelief in this country, the Government has laid down in this document an outline of the system under which the number of religious schools of all kinds is to be increased.

To anticipate the commentary on *Faith in the System* a little, there is far too much of this:

The Government recognises the aspirations of these and other faith communities to secure more schools and school places to offer education in accordance with the tenets of their faith.

and not one example of this or the equivalent:

“The Government equally recognises that atheists, humanists and other non-religious people have aspirations and perspectives that are no less to be valued by the state than those of religious people, and that where children of non-religious parents are being educated in a faith school, their needs are to be met in the same way as those of the other children. We also acknowledge that the levels of non-belief and the religiously unconcerned have been rising strongly for decades to the point that two thirds of children do not define themselves as religious<sup>21</sup> and religion is ranked only ninth in importance to identity<sup>22</sup>. We should show much greater sensitivity to these factors in the nature of our schools, our assemblies, citizenship and philosophy.”

While on the one hand emphasising its anti-discrimination laws, with the other the Government is handing out dispensation to religious managers of our schools to discriminate on the grounds of religion but does so using a variety of euphemisms. These leave the reader unclear as to whether it is being deliberately evasive, or – perhaps worse – that it takes discrimination in favour

---

<sup>21</sup> **Young People in Britain: The Attitudes and Experiences of 12 to 19 Year Olds, Research Report No. 564 published in 2004 by National Centre for Social Research (Extract from page 10)**  
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR564.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> **Home Office Research Study 274 Religion in England and Wales: findings from the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey Table 3.1: Which of the following things would say something important about you, if you were describing yourself? Religion was ranked as the ninth factor with 20% of respondents claiming it to be a factor.**

of the religious and against the non-religious as being of so little import that it does not merit a mention.

Throughout the document, groups that run sectarian schools are described as 'providers': they, are, of course, no such thing – they manage schools provided almost entirely at the expense of taxpayers – believers and unbelievers alike - according to their own privileged lights, in some cases modifying the National Curriculum in places important to them.

And repeatedly the document refers to 'Christian children' or 'Muslim children', insensitively assuming children automatically assume the faith that their parents claimed, truthfully or not, in seeking entry for their child into the school. This also ignores many of the two thirds of secondary school children who do not define themselves as religious, as noted above.

In the detailed commentary we have complained several times that the non-religious are barely mentioned, still less their aspirations considered. It may be argued that the document is about faith schools, to which the non-religious would be unwilling to send their children. This objection is both unjustified and insensitive, because the non-religious

- do not always have a choice about which schools to use;
- suffer the knock-on effects of the existence of sectarian schools;
- pay taxes like everybody else in support of these schools.

Furthermore, the punning title of the document implies, and its purpose is to convince us of it, that that we are supposed to have confidence in the presence of faith schools within a larger system. Surely unbelievers are just as much stakeholders – to use a favourite word of the Government – in this larger system as believers are.

This is why the NSS and others feel very aggrieved, though not surprised, that this document was produced in secret with no reference to the non-religious majority.

Note finally that this document *Faith in the System* was drawn up at public expense with no consultation of a large proportion of interested people and offering no support for its sweeping statements.

We are not calling for a similar consultation and glossy agenda, this time between the Government and representatives of the non-religious, to which religious delegates are not invited, because that would be unfair. But some degree of the discrimination non-religious people face is that the reverse be published without comment.

### **39 Freedom exercised by schools ... staff ... curriculum ... differential treatment**

While some of the freedoms enjoyed by schools in recent years have been welcome – for example, management of funds – we fear that the present trend towards greater and greater autonomy without any real overarching framework from the LEA or similar body will lead

to widespread abuses. It is all too easy under this kind of dispensation for a group of active extremist parents to take over a school and impose a regime that is exclusive or discriminatory even though the means may comply with Government guidelines on the surface; we have already seen the less obvious ways in which sectarian schools have been selecting pupils, for example.

Is it seriously suggested that an evangelical car dealer or a group of extremist priests are capable of administering a school so as not to disadvantage the wider community and the pupils themselves?

### **43 Which groups should be permitted to provide state-funded education, and with what safeguards?**

Our chief concern is to see secular principles at the heart of all decision-making, that is, equality for all, no privileges for religious groups, no association of the state or its organs with any religious activity. We therefore believe that the state should not fund schools of a religious character, whether they are trust schools, academies or voluntary controlled or aided.

We would oppose the policy outlined in the Liberal Democrat consultation paper for 'free schools' if 'suitable sponsor' were to include religious bodies, or groups of parents with similar aims. As at present, such schools would select pupils largely by their parents' religion, which goes against the proviso that the schools should be non-selective.

Superficially, it may appear to be electorally appealing to justify a multiplicity of sectarian and other schools on the grounds of widening choice. In practice, however, it can easily amount to a denial of choice for all but the pushy and articulate. Only 8% of London's population go to church on an average Sunday. Yet, often justified on the grounds of 'choice', over 20% - and rising - of London's secondary schoolplaces are in religious schools. That many of them are oversubscribed testifies to their popularity with those who can get their children into the over-subscribed ones - effectively private schools on the rates. Yet, some religious schools, e.g. those in special measures, are not popular, suggesting that it is good schools, rather than 'faith' that is the magnet. Numerous polls show that the public heavily opposes segregation of children in schools on grounds of faith.

Religious schools produce above-average results, but it's vital to ask "why?". LSE and Hallam University studies confirm that they cherry-pick the best pupils. This is thanks to privileged admissions criteria denied to community schools. Should parents be forced to

feign belief and to attend church (one school even requires attendance at church 48 times a year) to get into the best state-funded facility?

This brings me to academies, so popular with religious organisations and/or evangelical Christians, perhaps because two thirds of teenagers do not define themselves as religious. Could the breathtakingly-generous academy deal, bordering on profligacy, have been designed to facilitate such missions while serving as a vehicle for a few commercial organisations wishing to curry favour? Any accountant will confirm that the present value/cost of an academy's running expenses for the next 50 years is massive. Why should the state be paying such huge sums, providing spanking new schools and giving carte blanche to almost anyone able to stump up a paltry £2million to promote their ideologies—while starving community schools of cash?

Every privilege has its victims. And for choice/free schools, where the children of the financially, socially or educationally advantaged are more likely to gain admission, the victims are community schools. 'Choice' results in the best pupils being creamed off from already-disadvantaged comprehensives and so is a principle contributory factor to making many of them 'bog standard'. It all-too-often pushes these schools past (as shown in the response to Answer 5) the tipping point where less talented and disruptive pupils drag school performance down, rather than the more able inspiring their peers to greater heights.

We invite the Party to back genuine equality and justice in education. What parents want is good schools, rather than faith or other 'choice' schools. All maintained schools should be open to all, without discrimination on grounds of faith or none.

As for what else a suitable sponsor may be, all suggestions that come to mind also fall foul of the non-selection proviso, such as schools run by business people, musicians, linguists, sports organisations, etc. If we are talking about a group of parents who wish to be active in their children's education, then such groups would have to be carefully monitored, since they are liable to be infiltrated by extremist elements as we have pointed out above.

This idea needs further thought. If the Party wants to offer better opportunities for personal development to children who are, say, good linguists, and set up a school with a language bias, selection is inevitable – but at what age?

Many secondary schools are thought to be too big – staff cannot know all the pupils, and often don't know all the staff. Three or four smaller schools on the same campus, separately staffed and administered for the most part, perhaps sharing the most expensive resources, could offer aptitude-biased curricula while removing most of the objections to selection and improving staff/pupil relations.

We repeat what we said under question 39 above.

## **51 Effectiveness of schools inspection framework**

We note with more than a little concern that government is proposing to allow private Muslim schools (and other private sectarian schools) to form their own independent inspectorate, as detailed under question 2 above.

We want to see a universal secular inspection system (for both state schools and so-called public schools) that will be charged with preventing tendencies towards apartheid schooling in addition to the usual focus of interest. If the Government is keen on promoting social cohesion, it is, to say the least, inconsistent to allow the sort of freedom from objective inspection of which we have complained. The more fragmented the inspection regime, the greater the chance that one of the sectors will adopt lower standards and then will not be able to resist challenges to their independence.

## **61 - 7 Teaching workforce**

Under the new legislation indicated below, there is now a paradox in the employment of teachers in sectarian schools.

One of the problems faced by sectarian schools, certain to become worse as their number increases, is the lack of suitably qualified staff. This problem falls under two headings: science/maths and religion.

Sectarian schools have the same problem as other schools in recruiting science and maths graduates – they can usually find more congenial and probably better paid work than teaching under present conditions. However, sectarian schools have the privilege of imposing a religious qualification if they can, but the supply of religious science teachers is even more restricted, so these schools have to compromise.

The second heading is broader. In order to generate the much prized 'religious ethos', a sectarian school must, it is claimed, employ as many co-religionists as possible in senior positions and preferably elsewhere, as allowed by the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 which was later placed outside the scope of the Employment Regulations 2003. But there are many examples of schools where

even the head teacher is not a member of the appropriate religion. So much for the likely success of increasing the number of 'faith' schools.

But this is only one side of the difficulties caused by these exclusionary policies. The lack of religious teachers on the one hand and selective employment on the other has affected schools differently in different parts of the country.

Not only has the legal regime permitting discriminatory employment practices against non-religious teachers been widened, but at the same time there has been an expansion in the number of religious schools which can operate these regimes. Opportunities for non-religious teachers have accordingly been reduced by means of state-sponsored discrimination: this is regression not progress.

This discrimination is not just theoretical: real hardship is caused, especially in rural areas. In some counties there are more Church of England primary schools than all other schools (including Roman Catholic) put together. The job prospects of those teachers who are non-believers, or indeed don't happen to be of the 'right' faith is severely curtailed unless they are prepared to travel vast distances or assume a fake piety – or are fortunate enough to teach a subject in much demand, in which case their lack of religious compliance will be conveniently overlooked. We have also heard of instances where teachers have been denied promotion even in community schools if they have been unwilling to take part in collective worship.

Section 37 of the Act now permits discrimination against the non-religious head teachers of Voluntary Controlled schools, and (according to the Government) some non-religious non-teaching staff, mainly teaching assistants, in Voluntary Aided schools. This change regarding the religious status of head teachers is especially troubling because it will, in future, even be possible to refuse to appoint the best candidate because:

- i. of their (lack of) religious faith
- ii. of their not attending church sufficiently often
- iii. of their not being able to teach RE
- iv. of their relationships or conduct out of school hours being thought to fall short of religious teachings.

It will also be easy for a head teacher with strong religious commitment to give preference to similarly-minded candidates. This change therefore has the potential to damage the career prospects of all non-religious teachers in VC 'faith schools'. We acknowledge that the law does not require these religious criteria to be adopted,

it merely now permits them to be applied, but we fear that the criteria will be applied routinely.

It is beyond contention that the number of practising Christians has been in decline for decades, and there is no reason to suppose that the proportion of teachers who are Christians will have substantially risen. The number of faith schools is rising. This means that fewer and fewer Christian teachers are having privileged selection for more and more jobs, increasingly depriving those of the wrong faith or none, or those of insufficient piety, of jobs even where they are the best teacher for the job. Whatever job an employee takes, she or he must support the ethos of the employer.

**We recommend the repeal of Sections 58 and 60 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, which we understand is the policy of the Liberal Democrats. It is under these sections that the religious discrimination against school staff is permitted.**

### **Finally ...**

One of our two principle concerns is that the educational and therefore social apartheid based largely on the religious status of parents, already evident the present hotch-potch of school types, will become much worse before anyone in authority realises the dangers. Less able parents are already finding it difficult to negotiate their way through the mostly spurious choices that are on offer, and the less motivated won't bother. Meanwhile many children are passing through the school system with little experience of meeting children from other backgrounds.

The other concern is the religious apartheid in teacher employment. While the legislation that encourages this has not long been in existence, we fear that it won't be long before we see reports of long-serving teachers being eased out or constructively dismissed because they are of the wrong or no faith.

We hope to see introduced a simpler, secular educational system that endeavours to educate the children, include the parents and satisfy their aspirations regardless of their religion or lack of it. The state should concentrate on providing good schools, instead of relying on a discredited ideology that improvements in educational standards will somehow emerge from the interplay of artificially imposed market forces. The choice supposedly on offer is bogus for most parents. Consumerism has no place in our schools.

## Appendix

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>

## About the NSS

Founded in 1866, the National Secular Society challenges religious privilege. Promoting the separation of Church and State, it campaigns both at home and in the EU against the undue influence of religion in public affairs and education. The NSS defends scientific rationalism, freedom of speech and Human Rights, standing for equality for all regardless of religious conviction or non-belief.

The NSS sees secularism, that is, the position that the state should promote no religious view and that the religious should have no special privileges based on their religious beliefs, as an essential element in promoting equality between all citizens. We therefore take a keen interest in such causes as social cohesion and the fight against all forms of discrimination.

In our view, it is unchallengeable that religion is a major cause of discrimination, yet this fact is rarely acknowledged. Religion acts as a brake on removing forms of unfair discrimination by its disproportionate influence on the formation of policy and legislation. This religious influence, much of it rooted in the social fabric many centuries ago, does far more than simply impose itself on its own adherents. It informs current social attitudes even among those who no longer practise a religion. Such a mindset, reflexive rather than critical, traditional rather than analytical, affects all citizens when it shapes legislation or motivates those seeking to obstruct changes to our laws.

In particular, these traditional religious attitudes have prompted opposition to legislation on equality, such as that concerning sex and sexual orientation. In our campaigns for equality, it is our experience that we are frequently able to make common cause with groups campaigning against unfair discrimination in these other areas in opposition to the demands of religious organizations.

Not only that, but we are now experiencing in this country to an alarming extent a growing opposition from some religious groups to science and science education, a development that should be of concern to all political parties.