

Peers criticise “divisive influence” of faith schools

Posted: Thu, 12th May 2016

A House of Lords debate on school admissions has seen peers criticise segregation and division fed by faith schools and challenging Government plans to prevent civil society organisations from objecting to Admissions Code violations.

Lord Taverne, an honorary associate of the National Secular Society (NSS), said that "Religious discrimination in schools admissions is one of the reasons why faith schools are often a divisive influence in society."

He compared the policy of successive governments with the experience of the division of schools in Northern Ireland.

The debate came about after the Government was asked how the Schools Admissions Code would be "monitored and enforced" after the Department for Education [proposed banning](#) civil society organisations like the National Secular Society from raising complaints over Admissions Code violations.

"Of course, it is natural that family and home backgrounds will influence children's views and beliefs, but schools should not put children into categories of belief. They should be places that make children think for themselves; we do not treat children as Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat or UKIP children, so why should we let schools treat them as Catholic, Protestant, Muslim or Jewish children? Allowing breaches of the admissions code enables and encourages them to do so."

Lord Taverne said that many faith school admission policies seemed to be "designed to confuse and mislead, and the range of ways in which they have been discriminating are clearly designed to secure a greater homogeneity of religion in these schools."

The peer made strong criticisms of the Government's response to widespread violations of the Admissions Code found in a [study](#) by the Fair Admissions Campaign and the British Humanist Association.

"Only selected individuals, who will be in a much less good position to deal with the complexities of the code, are allowed to make those representations [about violation of the code]," he said.

Citing the opposition of the public, MPs and peers, he urged the Government to reverse course on its clampdown on complaints about unfair admissions practices and listen to the "wise words" of Professor Ted Cante, who warned in 2001 that "The system by which religious schools are able to set their own admissions criteria is clearly not fit for purpose."

Other peers echoed his concerns, including Lord Desai and Baroness Massey, who are also honorary associates of the NSS. Lord Desai said that schools must "comply with the admissions code" and that schools be allowed "to do illegal things just because there is excess demand for places."

Discrimination should not be allowed to "fester," he added.

The House of Lords debate took place on the same day that the United Nations [called on Ireland](#) to stop vast religious discrimination in the Irish education system. The Irish government has said that it will establish 400 schools by 2030 that are either non-denominational or multi-denominational.

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