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ADMISSION TO CHURCH OF ENGLAND SCHOOLS

By Chris Watkin

The Government seems on a number of occasions to have announced a grand new idea only to withdraw it a short time later. More than once the impression has been given that the Church of England accepts the idea (though General Synod certainly never did) and moves are taken to act on it, even if the original idea dies. Such a thing happened over the summer with the announcement that new faith based schools should be required to accept a quota of students from other faiths or none. Although this was opposed by the House of Lords and later dropped, it was not before announcements had been made by the Church of England that it would adopt the proposals.

Chris Watkin has been a Senior Education Officer in four of the North West Local Education Authorities and a member of St. John's Hartford in Cheshire for over 30 years. Chris has kindly agreed for us to reprint the following, taken from a letter to his Diocesan Bishop protesting at the Church's capitulation on an important issue. His letter highlights some of the important issues, although it was written before the Lords rejection of the plans.

"I am sorely dismayed at the way in which our Church leaders have so readily given in to the cries of this Government with regard to the changes in admission arrangements for Church of England schools.

The Secretary of State has presented a weak argument based upon fears of ghetto communities and irrelevant comparisons with Northern Ireland as reason for this change for new schools, whilst already indicating that he may extend provision to established schools.

Whilst I have no problem with regard to the Church's responsibilities to the whole community, it is not for the Secretary of State to lecture the Church about these matters, since this Government has done everything in its power to separate the laws of this land from its Christian foundations, and has manifestly encouraged the massive influx of non Christian faiths which appear to be at the root cause of his difficulties.

Equally, he has chosen to ignore the huge contribution made to our (once) highly valued Education system by the Church of England and, subsequently, the Roman Catholic Church. It is precisely, these Church schools which have upheld the quality and practice which most people in the country appear to value so much. It is these schools whose contribution he is seeking to diminish, in the same way as Labour Governments diminished the influence of Grammar Schools, leaving us with the mess of comprehensive education. Notably, he is including the Independent schools in his efforts to change their admissions arrangements too, threatening them with reduced charitable status if they do not comply – it all smacks of the usual Communist foundations which we have all had to get used to with this Government.

The natural consequence of this Bill will fundamentally affect the way in which Church schools operate, not just pertaining to Admissions policies, but in their whole operation. But let us consider Admissions, first:

- *Church schools, whatever their faith background, enjoy a huge respect and demand from parents, already, such that, there are few problems with regard to the number of children whose parents are applying for places. This is from the community and faith base which already has a claim to such schools. Severing this right by 25% will result in that*

community being denied a place which will then be allocated to a child with no Faith base (possibly from further afield and, even, from outside the associated Parish).

- *This is a bizarre aberration in itself, but particularly so in the case of those parents who may have been attending and supporting their local church over many years. By the same token, giving financially to the maintenance and development of that school as future investment for their own children.*
- *I have not been made aware of any changes which the Secretary of State intends to introduce with regard to the current funding models of church schools, but I expect that he will either, be pleased to allow the congregations to continue their same level of contribution, or will be happy to accept an argument for increased State funding, to allow for the Government's greater influence over the operation of such schools, bringing in yet more secular ways of doing things, as their price for increased costs being borne by the State.*
- *Children who have thus spent many years together in the same Sunday Schools, for example, with consistent Christian teaching from within their own church community, will be forced to accept places in schools some distance from their immediate church community, within a secular establishment, where Christian teaching has been systematically attacked and diminished over many years. This has been emphasised in more recent years with laws which abrogate the authority of the Bible and seek to replace that authority with humanist relativity.*
- *As always with this Government, the detail, of any Acts of Parliament emanating from the Bill will inevitably affect the current operations of church schools, beyond the Admissions process. I am sure you will be able to speculate that this will inevitably include:*
- *Demands from those of other faiths to have their own distinctive faith needs met within the church school – thus causing internal separation and division which the Government is supposedly seeking to play down a diminishing influence of the authority and representation of the church community within their own schools, and within the deliberations of their Local Education Authority.*
- *A requirement that church representation on church school Governing Bodies is replaced with a minimum 25% representation of those not expressing any faith (atheists presumably), in addition to the non church representation already in attendance, such as local councillors. Such developments will certainly reduce the overall majority of church influence in these schools to the point of irrelevance, in some cases.*
- *A requirement that only 75% of all teaching staff should be appointed with any faith connection and that curriculum and practice be scrutinised for any faith “brain washing” of those who have been admitted without any faith connection.*
- *Additional requirements for Returns to the Department of Education demonstrating that church schools are complying with the new Laws and can show increasing developments which will thus weaken the Church's direct influence in the ways described. This will lead to certain (non church) Governors being given the authority to “police” the activities within school and to report separately upon them.*

I am sure you will understand that I could explain further my concerns, but I trust that I have said sufficient for you and the House of Bishops, along with our colleagues within the Roman Catholic

and Jewish Community, particularly, to rise to the defence of our faith-based schools, before you find yourselves compromising so readily to a Government which has left its Christian Foundations behind, and seeks to diminish Christian influence in our society, even more.