

SECRETARY OF STATE

INTEGRATED EDUCATION

1. I have now completed my consultations on the subject of integrated education. In recent months the government has been under pressure, both in the House and elsewhere, to make its attitude and intentions clear on this subject. My view is that it would be unwise to attempt to prolong our present informal consultations further, and that some government statement on the subject is now needed.

BACKGROUND

2. These discussions go back at least to April 1974, when Basil McIvor (Minister of Education in the power-sharing Executive), made a statement to the Assembly in which he declared his belief that the mixing of school children would contribute to the reduction of community tension. He suggested that the law should be changed to enable a new category of school to be created, the shared school, in which both the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches could be equally involved in management.

3. Following this statement a very wide series of formal consultations took place with educational, religious, and political interests; these were continued under direct rule. In September 1975 Roland Moyle announced that there had not been a substantial degree of agreement in favour of the idea of shared schools, and that on the basis of the views which he had received he did not feel justified in attempting to change the law.

4. In these consultations the most determined opposition came from the Roman Catholic hierarchy. In general Protestant and educational interests were prepared to give at least a guarded welcome to the idea of shared schools, though opinion differed on the extent to which they might attract support in practice and about the speed with which they might be introduced. The Roman Catholic hierarchy, however, were adamant that they did not want to depart from the present structure.

5. The issue next came to the fore following a leak from the 'Oxford Conference' in July 1976, in which it was alleged that the then Secretary of State had undertaken to organise a conference on integrated education. The government immediately came under pressure to arrange the conference. Pressure came not only from bodies such as All Children Together, a pressure group for integrated education, but also from some political interests, including elements on the Unionist side, who expressed irritation that the Roman Catholic Church might be blocking desirable social initiatives.

6. For a variety of reasons the government was reluctant to proceed with the suggested conference. Given the known attitude of the Roman Catholic hierarchy it was unlikely that they would be prepared to participate in a public discussion in which their policies would be under constant attack; yet without their participation it was difficult to see that the conference could achieve anything worth while. An unsuccessful conference might even do positive harm to such examples of integration as already exist or are developing quietly; too much publicity focused on the limited integration which does exist might only make it more difficult for them to continue. It was therefore decided that no immediate decision should be taken but that instead there should be a further series of informal consultations to

see whether a suitable climate of opinion existed in which a conference might be expected to have worthwhile results.

7. These further consultations were set in hand by Roland Moyle, and continued by me. I have had meetings (formal and informal) with most of the political parties, All Children Together, Teachers' Unions, Education and Library Boards, Protestant Churches and with various representatives of the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

8. There has been considerable public debate on this issue recently. This arose mainly in the discussions on the Consultative Document on Secondary Reorganisation. A great many of the comments on the Consultative Document have expressed regret that no account was taken of the possibility of integrated education in putting forward new arrangements for secondary schools. Some of this comment may have stemmed from a desire to attack the Consultative Document, but most of it is undoubtedly genuine. It has been expressed in letters from the general public, from educational interests, and from Members of Parliament.

ASSESSMENT OF OPINION

9. As a result of these consultations, I do not think that opinion has changed in any fundamental way since the original consultations took place on Mr McIlvor's suggestion for shared schools. Those interests which had previously expressed some degree of support for the idea of integrated education continue to do so; in fact they are now more in number, and are expressing their views with more force. Among the minority community, the SDLP, the Republican Clubs and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation are all in favour. So too is the Alliance Party. However,

the Roman Catholic hierarchy remains as firm as ever in their opposition to the idea. I have no doubt that the Roman Catholic authorities will continue to resist any suggestions for change, and will not be prepared to co-operate in any serious discussions about ways and means of promoting integrated education.

OPTIONS

10. There appear to be three main options open to us:

(a) We could take the view that our present policy - which can be summarised as being to encourage school authorities to consider integration as and when opportunities arise but not to make any special provision for it - should be continued, with no new initiatives being taken.

(b) At the other extreme we could agree to promote further specific discussion of integration. This could taken the form of a conference, as suggested at Oxford, or we could adopt a suggestion put forward by some of the original supporters of the conference, and set up a working party on ways of promoting integration and removing any barriers that exist. (The idea of a working party has come from bodies such as All Children Together, who are now aware of the difficulties which a public conference would entail and who would now accept that more private and more careful study is needed if anything worthwhile is to be achieved).

(c) Between these two extremes we could adopt a more positive approach than our existing stance without going as far as isolating integration as an issue for special and separate consideration. This would involve:

(i) continuing our existing encouragement to school authorities to consider integration whenever possible;

(ii) ensuring that in all policy consideration and legislation the need to enhance opportunities for integration is fully borne in mind, and certainly ensuring that no new administrative or practical barriers to integration are erected;

(iii) responding as constructively as possible to any representations received on the need for or desirability of integration, indicating the government's interest in integration and our desire to build up confidence in the community in integration which is a necessary pre-requisite for initiatives; and, apart from integration,

(iv) giving added emphasis and support to inter-school activities across the denominational divide.

11. In choosing between these options I believe we need to consider the fact that there are in effect two distinct political audiences. In Great Britain and internationally, integrated education is all too often seen in rather simplistic terms as a possible panacea for Northern Ireland's problems, and there tends to be a complete lack of understanding

of the factors which rule out its immediate introduction. Even the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Great Britain appear to be at odds with their colleagues in Northern Ireland on this subject; in September 1976 the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Hume, was reported to have said that in the particular situation of Northern Ireland the argument for integrated schools is a very strong one, although he also added that such a suggestion was one for the Catholic Bishops here to consider.

12. In Northern Ireland there is a better appreciation of the practical difficulties which any attempt, however well intentioned, to achieve integration would face. These difficulties are not merely sectarian. In the most troubled areas, where advocates of integration might most hope to achieve an improvement in community attitudes, housing is so segregated that it is almost inevitable that local schools would attract children of only one religion, irrespective of what management or other arrangements might be made.

RECOMMENDATION

13. I cannot recommend that we should continue simply to maintain our present policy. It will become increasingly difficult to explain this policy convincingly if we cannot point to some positive steps which we are taking or some possible developments which are emerging from it. We will also appear not to be giving people who are genuinely concerned about improvement in community relations the support which they deserve.

14. The idea of a conference is not attractive. Given the attitude of the Roman Catholic hierarchy and their likely abstention from a conference any discussion which might take place would be unproductive. The idea of

a working party on integration does not give rise to quite the same difficulty but I have no reason to believe that the Roman Catholic authorities would be any more willing to participate in such a working party than in a conference. In particular I doubt whether any Roman Catholic priest would be permitted to serve on it; no doubt Catholic laymen could be appointed to it, but they would not be able to speak with the authority of the Roman Catholic school authorities. Any conclusions or recommendations that the working party produced, however modest, would be seen as directed at undermining the Roman Catholic Church's position, and as such there would be very great difficulty in securing their agreement to co-operate in the implementation of any of the conclusions. In the light of all this, I do not believe that either a conference or a working party specifically on integration could be expected to achieve anything worth while.

15. The third option is to build on existing policy in the way outlined in paragraph 10(c) above. To some extent this would be a presentational, in that we would be concerned to emphasise more strongly the government's desire to see more integration. But it would also have practical elements, in that we would be positively looking for opportunities of increasing integration wherever possible. The best example of this arises from the recent discussions on the Consultative Document on Secondary Reorganisation, where there has been a very strong body of opinion in favour of separate sixth form provision. Even the most determined opponents of the idea of integration seem willing to concede that at least in a limited number of areas some degree of sixth form integration could be considered and there are major advantages in that such provision would either be based on further education colleges where there is a

tradition of integration or on separate sixth form colleges which would be new.

16. This means that we will have to consider carefully the management arrangements for sixth form colleges so as to be sure that we are not creating any impediments or deterrents to integration. On the general question of management arrangements for reorganised secondary schools, a decision will have to be taken on the composition of the management committees for controlled comprehensive schools. Under the existing legislation there are two models which might be chosen; controlled secondary schools have specific provision for transferors representatives (in practice representatives of Protestant Churches) where controlled grammar schools do not.

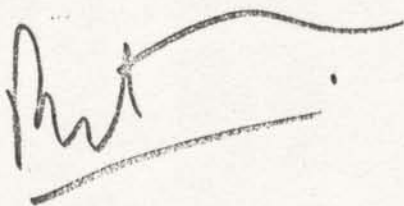
17. In my minute of 1 April on the question of secondary reorganisation generally I suggested that the working party on management should be asked to take a completely new look at the way schools should be managed in Northern Ireland, taking into account the report of the Taylor Committee in Great Britain. One issue which this working party is bound to want to look at is the role of transferors representatives on the management committees of controlled schools. I believe that we should ask the working party specifically to look at any unnecessary obstacles which present arrangements for school management may put in the way of integration. Whether we do so or not the question is bound to arise in some shape or other.

18. While the issues of the reorganisation of secondary education and school management are undoubtedly the main areas where integration might be advanced there are others. For example, there are questionmarks over the long-term viability of all the existing teacher training institutions (in the light of the cutbacks in the number of students being admitted). One possible option is that training facilities be centralised, which could well have the effect of reducing or eliminating the degree of segregation between the three teacher training colleges. In the field of school transport we have already been able to make some minor changes which have the incidental effect of making it easier to provide school transport for children whose parents choose to send them to an integrated school rather than a segregated one.

19. It is axiomatic that government is not going to attempt to impose integration by law, nor deprive the Roman Catholic Church of the grants which it currently enjoys. So our role can only be to remove any impediments which may exist and to ensure that we do not create any new ones, and this would have to be made clear in any statement of government policy.

20. My conclusion is that we should adopt the 'piecemeal' approach outlined in paragraph 15 above. If you agree I will then draft a statement giving the government's conclusions to the consultations that I have conducted, and spelling out government policy for the future. This statement would need to be made some time after the statement on secondary reorganisation.

21. The Second Reading in the House of Lords of Lord Dunleath's Private Member's Bill on Integrated Education is due to take place on June 23. This will be eight days after my statement on secondary reorganisation, and I believe that if possible I should use this opportunity to make the statement of government policy on integration. A Second Reading speech would allow me to set out the history and deploy the arguments in some detail. Using this debate would also, no doubt, please the Alliance Party, and I will, in any event, have to say something about our policy during the debate.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'Melchett', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

LORD MELCHETT
3 June 1977