

EDUCATION BILL

Standing Committee debates

Members

Adams, Mrs. Irene (chairman)
Bailey, Mr. Adrian (*West Bromwich, West*)
Brady, Mr. Graham (*Altrincham and Sale, West*)
Coker, Vernon (*Gedling*)
Flint, Caroline (*Don Valley*)
Francis, Dr. Hywel (*Aberavon*)
Grayling, Chris (*Epsom and Ewell*)
Heppell, Mr. John (*Nottingham, East*)
Kumar, Dr. Ashok (*Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East*)
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor (*Epping Forest*)
Laws, Mr. David (*Yeovil*)
Lewis, Mr. Ivan (*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills*)
Miliband, Mr. David (*South Shields*)
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen (*Eddisbury*)
Purnell, James (*Stalybridge and Hyde*)
Timms, Mr. Stephen (*Minister for School Standards*)
Touhig, Mr. Don (*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales*)
Turner, Mr. Andrew (*Isle of Wight*)
Willis, Mr. Phil (*Harrogate and Knaresborough*)

Mr. D. R. Lloyd, Miss Jones, *Committee Clerks*

11 December 2001

Col 28

Mr Brady: . . . The amendments are designed to examine the Government's commitment to innovation. Is it akin to the Government's commitment to end selection, which—even if we have read the Minister's lips—may be reversed? Is it similar to their pledge to promote the establishment of **faith** schools to raise standards, which is quietly moved away from as time passes and controversy arises?

Col 67

Mr Andrew Turner: . . . Let us explore some possibilities. For example, let us consider a community school that is to become a **faith** school, with 85 per cent. of its pupils being Muslim. It has no desire to close, reopen and seek a foundation to support its application, but wishes to merge an existing foundation, perhaps a local religious group, with the existing school. Therefore, it needs approval from the Secretary of State to derogate from the existing powers, including school organisation committees and so on, to enable it to change the character of the existing school. However, under the present arrangements, there is some doubt whether the Secretary

of State is willing even to contemplate such a move. Is it not reasonable that those who will devote so much time and energy to preparing the proposal should have some guidance from the Secretary of State, if not as to what she will accept then at least as to what she will not accept? That is the least that is reasonable.

Col 81

Chris Grayling: Let me give a practical example. Without wishing to pick any particular group, let us suppose that a newly appointed head took a personal decision to change radically the character of the school to make it a strongly **faith**-based school, in a way that was not in the interests of the school community. Although Ofsted might come back later and say that that was not appropriate, none the less, on day one of his job the head would have the freedom to make swingeing changes to the school and its curriculum and culture without restriction.

Mr. Timms: Let me draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to clause 6, which sets out that the exemptions available for a school that has earned autonomy relate to the curriculum and pay and conditions. The hon. Gentleman seems to be suggesting that there could be wide scope to change all kinds of other things, but that would not be available under earned autonomy. The powers automatically available under earned autonomy are quite circumscribed.

Col 96

Mr Willis: . . . Amendments Nos. 44 to 47 are probing amendments. They build on what the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West was trying to deal with in his amendments. I am trying to find out from the Minister whether the total limit of earned autonomy is simply the national curriculum and pay and conditions, or whether it will touch on other areas. In each of the amendments, I have sought to insert a phrase that broadens its scope. If the Minister does not accept the amendments, is he saying that earned autonomy extends purely into those two areas and nowhere else, and that the Government do not envisage any extension to it? Last weekend, head teachers spoke to me about issues including selection, admissions policies and religious education, particularly for children from single-**faith** schools who come into the maintained sector. I should like an assurance on the record that the Minister does not propose any extension in terms of earned autonomy. That is the purpose of the amendments.

18 December 2001

Col 222-223

Mr Willis: . . . The Minister claimed he did not want a divisive educational system. What will the expansion of **faith** schools do? Is the Minister conscious of what is happening in terms of some of the **faith** schools in Britain? The Minister for School Standards said just two weeks ago that his attack on grammar schools was over. Opposition Members might applaud that, but it means that the Government's stated

intention when they came to power that there should be no more selection has been thrown out of the window, and that grammar schools are now acceptable. Grammar schools, specialist schools, **faith** schools—if that is not creating a divisive education system, what is?

10 January 2002

Col 336

Mr. Willis: I beg to move amendment No. 330, in page 29, line 19, at end insert 'including religious observance'. . . . This is a probing amendment, because it is important at this stage to ask the Minister to place on the record the Government's thinking, particularly about **faith** schools and the way in which admission arrangements will be organised in the light of their declared intention and the Minister's strong support for a significant expansion of **faith** schools. . .

However, the clause provides for admission forums.

The job of the forums will change as a result of the powers to innovate. The Minister has failed to take one factor fully into account. If significant changes are made to the way in which schools innovate and a plethora of new specialist schools exercise their 10 per cent. right to select by aptitude—technically speaking, half the schools in Britain could do so by 2005—so we have an acceleration of voluntarily aided, single **faith** schools with their own admission arrangements, we will have a different situation from the one for which the Minister is legislating in the Bill. The job of the forums would become incredibly complicated. It is important, therefore, that we give them and local authorities as much flexibility as possible in deciding the overall framework for admissions. That is partly the reasoning for the amendment. . .

I am sure that the Minister will agree that the creation of more single **faith** schools could have a serious impact on other schools' admissions. One does not have to be a genius to work out that in an authority like mine, where there are six high quality comprehensive schools, of which two are church schools, the creation of another church school would have a significant impact on the schools that are not single **faith**. That is stating the obvious; it is not rocket science to work that out. I am arguing that the admission forums and local authority should be able to consider grounds of religion in deciding the admissions policy.

Although you are slightly older than me, Mr. Pike, we are both of an age to know that **faith** schools have been around a long time. Following the Education Act 1870, there was an attempt to fill the gaps in primary education that were left by the National Society, which provided Anglican schools, and the British and Foreign School Society, which provided non-conformist schools. It was not until Butler's Education Act 1944 that we saw the present arrangements for funding secondary schools and school transport. Those who take a keen interest in the issue—as many Committee members do—will know that most of the school transport arrangements arose from the 1944 Act.

Since then, there has been a general concordat that in return for funding and transport, there would be no expansion of **faith** schools, particularly at secondary level. That worked extremely well until the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, which let the genie out of the bottle. It made it clear that other faiths could receive state funding for the establishment of schools in the same way as other voluntary-aided schools from the Church of England, Roman Catholic Church and the Methodists. The then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) had little option at the time, and Liberal Democrat policy supported him. It was illiberal to say that Anglicans could have schools but Muslims could not. I accept that point.

We have had some arguments about this, so I want to make it clear to the Minister that, like him, I speak from the basis of having a strong **faith** that has been an important part of how I conduct my life and business since I discovered it during my work in Chapelton many years ago. I have no objection in principle to **faith** schools, and our policy is not to dismantle them and create a secular system. The amendment is aimed at trying to convince the Government that we cannot have an unbridled expansion of **faith** schools without

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considering its impact. We must ensure that admission arrangements protect the broader community from segregation, of which we have seen the worst effects in Northern Ireland, parts of the United States and other countries where there is a sharp division in schools in religion and race.

Had the Government not made comments about wanting to extend the number of **faith** schools and encouraged the Church of England in its quest to establish another 100 secondary schools, we would not be having this debate. Everyone got along fairly well together, and there was no great demand from the Muslim community for single **faith** schools. The Minister can tell us how many have been created since 1998, but I believe that it is only three, so we are not talking about huge numbers. However, Lord Dearing's report, "The Way Ahead: Church of England schools in the new millennium" clearly showed that the Church of England wanted to create another 100 schools to fill the gaps and to be on a par with Roman Catholic secondary school provision. An argument in favour of that was that the Church of England has a significant number of primary schools. That is historic. The Church of England has generally provided primary education in villages throughout the country successfully and harmoniously. To be fair, the Roman Catholics have done the same, and there is no great problem with that. The issues arise at secondary level.

The problem has arisen through encouragement by the Prime Minister, who has been clear about his own **faith** and his belief in church schools. The Minister has also made his views clear. The Government's position was clear in the Green Paper and in the White Paper, and we have also had the Government's unilateral decision to reduce the capital requirement of **faith** schools from 15 per cent. to 10 per cent. without any debate in the House of Commons. That was a major decision that affected the capital requirements of schools and directly affected local authorities, but there was no debate

about it. The decision was taken by the Department for Education and Skills to further a policy that has appeared by stealth over the past two years.

The Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and the Minister have stated openly that the basis for the Government's policy is their belief that church schools do better than other schools. I flatly refute that argument. There is only slim evidence that that is the case. The research paper that was produced for the Bill shows that examination results of five A to Cs are better in Church of England schools, and I accept that logic.

However, one must consider the make-up of Church of England secondary schools and the number of free school meals in those schools. It is a pity that the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Wales is not here today, because the National Assembly has done some excellent research that shows that when the other factors are taken into account, church schools do not do significantly better than other schools.

It is clear that church schools do well because they have superb head teachers. There are two such schools in my constituency—St. Aidans and St. John Fisher—

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which the Minister has visited. I regard Dennis Richards at St. Aidans as the best head teacher with whom I have ever had the pleasure to work. The school also has a largely committed parent body that supports the youngsters. If the catchment area is broadly middle class, the leadership is excellent and the parents are supportive, the school will be successful, because those are the ingredients for success. I defy the Minister to say anything different.

Mr. Timms: The hon. Gentleman mentioned my visit to St. Aidans in his constituency, which works closely with St. John Fisher. They jointly organise sixth form provision, which is a good example of partnership in which we envisage faith schools increasingly taking part. Given the hon. Gentleman's rhetoric about faith schools, I was impressed by the school and was intrigued to discover that the chairman of the governing body is his constituency assistant. She made a good speech that celebrated the value of the faith ethos of the school, which is rather different from the point made by the hon. Gentleman. Is the hon. Gentleman changing the policy of the Liberal Democrats? He has been hostile to the concept of faith schools up to now, but he sounds more accommodating this morning.

Mr. Willis: I object to those comments. The Government are thrusting a policy on us without debate, so I have every right to question and scrutinise it.

It is unfair of the Minister to bring my casework into the debate. That is rather below his usual standards. I have always been at pains to point out that some church schools are brilliant and turn out good products. Where I, Bishop Blackburn and Canon Hall, the chief executive of the Church of England's schools board, stand is fundamentally different from where the Minister stands. I believe that church schools, like those in my constituency, should be run by faiths for communities. They should not be run for faiths, which is fundamentally different.

One positive aspect of religion—and it applies not just to the Church of England or Roman Catholicism, but to Islam, Sikhism and Greek Orthodoxy—is that it brings value systems into schools. I have no objection to using such values as part of a school's ethos, but I have a fundamental objection to the state paying for the promulgation of a **faith** within a school. That is wholly unacceptable.

10.15 am

Mr. Timms: My understanding of the two excellent schools in the hon. Gentleman's constituency is that they have a 100 per cent. **faith** requirement. Is that not associated with the high level of parental commitment that he identified as being at the core of their success?

Mr. Willis: I have already admitted that. I acknowledged that various factors contribute to highly successful schools—mainly middle class catchments, supportive parents and excellent leadership with a clear direction. A **faith** is not necessary to achieve success. King James's school in Knaresborough is another brilliant school in my constituency with a real sense of purpose and direction achieved through its technology and

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teacher training status and so forth. I am most proud of the fact that my constituency has the largest ecumenical sixth form in Britain.

I disagree with the Secretary of State who said on Second Reading that **faith** schools should have tangential relationships with each other; it should be a fundamental bringing together of Roman Catholics, Church of England and others. Both schools in my constituency include some youngsters who do not have a **faith**. It is simply not the case that 100 per cent. have a **faith**. Surely the Minister would accept that.

We should not be encouraging schools to be run for faiths, but promoting the coming together of faiths. We want far more ecumenical work in schools. We should encourage the multi-**faith** schools that have been so successful in Liverpool, which is very much a polarised city in terms of religion. The Minister should visit Liverpool to see those schools at work.

The amendment is designed to question the Government's thinking. An excellent research paper points out that support for more **faith** schools has not come from the public. An NOP survey showed that only one in 10 people were strongly supportive of having more **faith** schools. The National Union of Teachers, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, the National Association of Head Teachers, the Secondary Heads Association and the Local Government Association have all strongly questioned whether the policy will bring communities together and offer a broad education.

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): Although the hon. Gentleman is right to say that those organisations have not supported an increase in

faith schools, what about the Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities at grass roots level? Those groups want that increase, and in those circumstances it is difficult for the Government to push the process forward. He has overlooked that.

Mr. Willis: I have enormous respect for the hon. Gentleman, and I regard him as a friend in this House, but I have not disregarded that. I visit Bradford often, and I also visited Oldham and the hon. Gentleman's constituency recently. I accept that elements of those communities have made demands. It would be absolutely wrong to say that the massed ranks of the Muslim community want their children educated in Muslim schools. When I visited Dixons city technology college in Bradford, it was interesting to meet Muslim, Sikh and Hindu youngsters who declared that they and their parents wanted good schools. They were happier to work with their white counterparts in Bradford, rather than being in ethnic ghetto schools, which was the exact phrase one of them used. The evidence is, and the Minister knows it full well, that fewer than one in 10 people regularly go to church or are a member of a single faith group. The national demand that the Prime Minister—

Mr. Lewis: I should like to ask the hon. Gentleman about that last point. As participation in organised religion has undoubtedly declined, it is interesting that the number of parents wanting to send their children

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to faith-based schools has increased considerably. Does that not say something powerful about parental choice?

The Chairman: Order. I have allowed you to range widely, as I think that you have recognised, Mr. Willis. I hope that you will now return to the amendment and move towards a conclusion.

Mr. Willis: You have been most generous, Mr. Pike, but the Committee will appreciate that the issue is important. I am grateful to the Minister for raising that point because it is the big flaw in his argument. The Minister must listen to my answer: if he considers his league tables, he will notice that at the bottom of those tables—which I find quite abhorrent—are a significant number of church schools. That is absolutely true. If the Minister can tell me that there is a clamour from parents who want to go to those schools, I shall sit down, but there is not.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Willis: No, I want to finish making my point. Parents want their kids to go to good schools. I want any community to have access to good schools.

Mr. Lewis: The hon. Gentleman did not address the specific point that I raised. Never mind league tables or other diversionary issues: it is a fact that as adult participation in organised religion has declined—there is no dispute about that—the percentage of parents who choose to and wish to send their children to a faith based school has significantly increased. That is a fact.

Mr. Willis: With the greatest respect, the Minister knows that that is not a fact. Neither he nor his Department have any evidence to support it because they have not collected statistics to back it up. The Department said that it thinks that that is the case. The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) will jump to his feet now and tell me that the 161 grammar schools—

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): One hundred and sixty-five.

Mr. Willis: The number has increased since our last debate. Significant numbers of children apply to go to the 165 grammar schools, for the reasons given by the hon. Gentleman—

Caroline Flint: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Willis: It is getting exciting. I shall give way to the hon. Lady.

Caroline Flint: I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to Rossington high school in my constituency. It is not near the top in any league table for the reasons given by the hon. Gentleman, such as the catchment area, which is a poor mining village. However, the school is applying to become a Church of England secondary school.

The hon. Gentleman earlier raised the matter of admissions policies. Will he comment on the statement made by the diocese in response to the question,

"Would not a church school be divisive and deny places to children who were not of the faith?"

In reply, the diocese said:

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"The ultimate aim is the establishment of an inclusive school that serves all the Rossington community and is a positive force in the school's quest for continual improvement in attainment."

It also said that although it may be open to children of the faith outside the catchment area, the children of Rossington will come first in terms of the admission policy, whether they are of the faith or not.

Mr. Willis: I could kiss the hon. Lady. She has succinctly supported the amendment, the aim of which is not to stop the expansion of faith schools. I will do that at another time and in another place. What I propose is not controversial—the hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) put her finger on the button. I want faith schools of the future to be inclusive, not to become exclusive and to turn away at their gates children of the local community because they are not of that faith or because they are of other faiths. It is abhorrent that a school in a largely Muslim area deliberately sets out to deny Muslim children access to the school. It is equally abhorrent that in one Lancashire Church of England school—I will not name it in Committee, but I shall do so privately if anyone asks me to do so—the policy deliberately sets out to stop people

of a different denomination of that **faith** from getting in because they are not good enough to go to that school. That is not acceptable, and it should not be acceptable to a Labour Government.

The admission forum and the local authority should have the right to tell all their schools that they cannot be entirely exclusive in terms of their **faith**. As the Cattle report on the riots in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford, and as Lord Ouseley recommended, all the schools should be obliged to take children of other faiths and of no **faith**. If the Minister is right that people are clamouring to get their children into those schools, we should consider why they are doing so. We should ask what is the quality of the school's leadership and what it is they offer, which should be open to all. Youngsters in many constituencies, including yours and mine, Mr. Pike, are denied access to the so-called good schools by an accident of birth. That is not right.

The amendment seeks from the Minister an assurance that in future no church school will deny children access because they are not of that **faith** or of have **faith**. . . .

I am sure that we shall return to the question of **faith** schools later in our proceedings and perhaps later in the Bill's progress, but it is important to comment briefly now on the official Opposition's position. We support, and have always supported, the freedom of parents to have the maximum choice in the schools that are available to them.

I have not checked the Hansard record of the Committee that considered the School Standards and Framework Bill in 1998, but I recall that my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) and I tabled an amendment that was designed to facilitate schools of whatever **faith** community becoming part of the maintained sector. I cannot recall whether the amendment was selected, but we have always been clear, as has been said, that it would be wrong to allow Church of England, Roman Catholic and Jewish schools, but not Muslim or other **faith** schools.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough seems to have reached the position, which I am not sure is tenable, that **faith** schools are acceptable and perhaps even a good thing as long as they have no **faith** requirement or overly religious content.

Mr. Willis: I never said that.

Mr. Brady: The hon. Gentleman's position is clear. He does not feel that it is acceptable for schools to specify the pupils whom they admit on grounds of **faith**, but it is difficult to see how a Church of England school with no Anglican children could function as a **faith** school in a meaningful sense.

I think that the Minister for School Standards is in a different part of this territory. In an intervention on the hon. Gentleman, he said that underlying the strong parental involvement in and support for schools in Harrogate and Knaresborough was the near 100 per cent. **faith** involvement in those schools.

The Conservative party's position is that schools must largely have control of their admissions policies. It would be dangerous to suggest that **faith** schools be prohibited from selecting their intake on the basis, partly at least, of pupils' **faith**.

Dr. Kumar: The hon. Gentleman's party supports **faith** schools, and he says that it is important to have people of the relevant **faith** in those schools. Does he believe in religious education or religious instruction in those schools? There is a wide gap between the two, and the answer to that question will determine his party's position.

Mr. Brady: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The issue may go even wider than that to the ethos of the school, what we have a right to expect a maintained school to teach and how we would expect such a school to educate pupils in the broadest sense. Apart from the national curriculum requirements, which might be suspended for some schools, according to earlier discussions in the Committee it is legitimate to impose equality of treatment for boys and girls and other requirements and expectations. It is proper that **faith** schools should

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be able to instruct in their **faith** and maintain the religious ethos of the school.

We each have the perspective of our own experience. There are Church of England and Roman Catholic primary schools and three Roman Catholic secondary schools in my constituency. The environment in which they operate gives the lie to anyone who makes the superficial argument that **faith** schools per se cause social or religious divisions within a community. Clearly, they do not. The Blessed Thomas Holford school, an extremely good Roman Catholic high school in Altrincham, has been in the maintained sector for a long time. My constituency also has two Roman Catholic grammar schools, St. Ambrose college and Loreto convent school. As a brief aside, that school was an independent school maintained by charitable trusts. It was so attracted by grant-maintained status that it opted in to the maintained sector. That is a good illustration of the attractiveness of the former grant-maintained regime.

The diversity of provision works well in the interests of local parents who can make a choice about the schooling of their children on the basis of religion, as well as other aspects.

Dr. Kumar: The hon. Gentleman mentioned diversity. On the principle of diversity, would his party support a Muslim **faith** school that decided that the girls should wear the hijab?

Mr. Brady: I made it clear in my earlier comments that there are expectations which may appropriately be placed on maintained schools regarding, for example, equality of treatment for boys and girls. The hon. Gentleman may be aware of a case regarding the wearing of school uniforms at the Secretary of State's former school. Such an issue is difficult and must be handled with sensitivity. The school handled it sensibly, and came to a reasonable settlement that maintained the ethos of the school. It was not a Muslim school.

Dr. Kumar: So the hon. Gentleman believes in limited diversity, and that the demands of **faith** schools should be limited.

Mr. Brady: Inevitably, we must consider trade-offs when we discuss maintained schools and taxpayers' money. It is proper and reasonable for the state to have a view about what is acceptable in such schools. I do not advocate maintained schools of any religion or sect behaving in whatever way they see fit, without any regulation. However, it is crucial to consider why **faith** and church schools work well. Anglican, Roman Catholic and Jewish schools have worked well for many years. On principle, it would be wrong to deny such forms of education to those of other faiths, and I hope that all members of the Committee take that view.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): I do not know whether my hon. Friend shares my experience of **faith** schools. Church of England schools tend to be better at supporting, encouraging and educating pupils of all religious backgrounds in the full range of religious beliefs, knowledge and understanding. In recognising

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and being sympathetic to the various cultural dimensions of children of other religions, pupils develop a greater sensitivity towards other faiths in **faith** schools than in many non-**faith** schools.

The Chairman: Order. Can we try to keep a bit closer to the amendment before us? I know that they are important issues.

Mr. Brady: These are important and far-reaching issues, but I shall certainly try to keep closer to the amendment. I have been led down various paths. I shall try to resist the blandishments of hon. Members on both sides of the Committee.

Crucially, there is a question mark over the genesis—if that is not an inappropriate term—of the Government's policy. I fear that the Government hit upon the idea of an expansion of **faith** schools based on the broad statistical fact that church schools tend to perform better than the generality of schools. They then fell into the trap of believing that church schools will be good schools, and that if more church schools are created the quality of education as a whole will rise. I caution Ministers not to believe that that is necessarily the case. Parents want good schools: that underlies the debate and the demand that the Under-Secretary flagged up. There is a dearth of good schools in many areas. If parents know of a good church school nearby, they will want to send their children to it or to one like it. There is a danger that the Government see the success of existing church schools as an easy route to raising standards overall.

I said at the outset that I did not want to speak at length. We will deal with this issue on later amendments in more detail. It is an extremely important debate. I hope that I have made it clear that the Government's policy of allowing an expansion of **faith** schools where there is demand—

Mr. Willis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brady: I gladly give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Willis: I realise that the hon. Gentleman is coming to the end of his remarks. He is not addressing the fundamental part of the amendment. Does the Conservative party believe that school admissions policies should be able deliberately to exclude all children in those communities, other than those of a single **faith**?

Mr. Brady: I probably responded to the amendment very much in the spirit that the hon. Gentleman proposed it. We may have wandered from the particular words on the amendment paper. His last comment bears little relation to the substance of his amendment. Certainly, church schools and **faith** schools should be able to take **faith** issues into account in their admissions policies.

Mr. Willis: One hundred per cent.

Mr. Brady: The hon. Gentleman is trying to lead me where I do not want to go. We should stress the essentially liberal point that, if parents want a particular religious context for the education of their children, they should be able to have that whenever possible. It is worrying that the Liberal Democrat position now appears to be that **faith** should not be

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taken into account in the admissions process of existing **faith** schools as well as new **faith** schools. That is regrettable. I support the Government's thinking, in so far as it enhances parental choice, but I give a strong warning that Ministers must not fall into the trap of regarding an expansion of **faith** schools as a shortcut or an easy route to raising school standards overall.

Mr Lewis: . . . I turn now to **faith** schools. Unless I missed it, both hon. Members who spoke ignored one important issue. Since 1997, a number of the requests to become voluntary-aided schools and to move into the maintained sector have come from schools that were operating in the private sector without any requirement to deliver the national curriculum and without being subject to the same accountability, transparency and standards. That is an important factor to take into account in the context of the debate. Many parents choose to send their children to private sector schools because of their religious or cultural ethos. Surely it is good if pupils attending those schools return to the state sector. It is in the best

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interest of pupils to have access to the same curriculum, standards and inspection regimes and, as the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough said, to feel part of the family of schools in the community.

It is right to find ways of bringing pupils back into the maintained sector. We should be realistic and honest enough to acknowledge that parents who choose to send their children to private **faith** schools would be unlikely to send them to schools in the

maintained sector if the **faith**-based option were not available to them. Parents' beliefs and values are important, so maintaining **faith**-based schools within the state sector provides a viable and valued option.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough is extremely knowledgeable about the whole education sector and he is an individual of great integrity. I say that not just to butter him up. However, an intellectual inconsistency is evident in what he and others say about **faith** schools.

Fundamental criticisms have been expressed in Committee and elsewhere about **faith** schools, which have existed for many years and made a massive contribution to education in this country. Arguing for change in a big way amounts to asserting that **faith**-based schools as historically and currently constituted have made and are making a negative contribution to society. If **faith** schools are making a negative contribution to community cohesion and relationships between people, it would be far more honest—and politically brave—to come off the fence and admit it.

Single **faith** schools most concern the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough. As I understand it, the majority of **faith** schools through history have been predominantly single **faith**. It is perfectly respectable and reasonable to criticise such schools on the basis that the concept of a single **faith** school is negative and undermines the very fabric of the society that we all want to live in. That is a consistent argument, but it is inconsistent to maintain that position while acknowledging that some single **faith** schools are good.

Mr. Willis: I am grateful to the Minister for his kind comments.

I shall try to explain my views in a nutshell. The Minister has mistaken my position and that of my party. I want children who are not linked to a particular **faith** or who have other faiths to have access to good **faith** schools. I want the Government to ensure that no **faith** school can, through its admissions policy, discriminate against children of other faiths or of no **faith**. Kids in my and other constituencies should have access to those schools irrespective of their particular faiths. The Minister seems unable fully to appreciate that concept.

Mr. Lewis: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but he should understand that some parents choose a particular school for their children precisely because it is a single **faith** school or predominantly of one **faith**. That is a significant part of a school's attraction to a parent. Whether we believe it is right or reasonable for parents to choose on that basis, we

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must respect the principle of parental choice. Parents choose a school for a range of reasons.

I agree that it is wrong to present all single **faith** schools as good, or to claim that they are the only schools with a strong ethos, sound principles and good leadership. That is

nonsense. Some **faith** schools are excellent and some are under-performing. However, if the hon. Gentleman is arguing that as many levers as possible should be put into the system to prevent the creation of single **faith** schools, he is effectively denigrating their contribution over many years to this country's education as negative, destructive and divisive. If that is what he is arguing, I respect his position, but I cannot agree with him.

Mr. Willis: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Lewis: In a moment. I disagree with that analysis of the contribution that **faith** schools have made to the development of the British education system. Evidence suggests that such schools have met parental preferences and provided young people with high quality education. It is wrong to put those schools in a box labelled "bad for society, undermines the fabric and cohesion of society".

Mr. Willis: The record will show that I have never uttered any such comments about **faith** schools. I have been at pains to point out that some **faith** schools are excellent. Why cannot the Minister understand that the purpose of the amendment is to prevent **faith** schools from excluding youngsters of no **faith** or of other faiths? Parents in a local community who want their children to go to the good **church** school should be able to send them there even though they do not share the particular **faith**. That is my point, not that **faith** schools are bad schools or harmful to society.

Mr. Lewis: I realise that the hon. Gentleman did not say that. I am explaining my view of his perception of the historical and current contribution of single **faith** schools. The clear corollary of his and his party's position is that **faith** schools undermine the community and society that most of us want to create.

I want to make another point, though it does not relate to anything that the hon. Gentleman has said in Committee, and I respect the fact that he has not used these arguments. I disagree with the people who jumped on the bandwagon after 11 September and the summer disturbances in northern towns—including those in the constituency of our Chairman—and used those incidents to justify their opposition to the principle of **faith**-based education. They used current events to justify an intellectual position that they had held before. The hon. Gentleman, to his credit, has not used that argument as a justification for the position that he and his party hold.

11 am

Dr. Kumar: I am not one of those who jumped on the bandwagon. As a liberal **humanist** all my life, I have seen the danger of **faith** schools. I understand the Minister's point, but the recent examples that we have seen in Northern Ireland have worried me. The

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division between the Catholic and Protestant communities is an example on our doorstep. . .

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Mr Lewis . . . **Mr. Lewis:** This issue will continue to be debated, but I must respond to the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar), which I failed to do earlier. We would all accept that the behaviour and actions of people in Northern Ireland in recent weeks is intolerable and heinous. The problems of Northern Ireland are much more complex and cannot be related merely to **faith**-based education.

That was my point in relation to Bradford, Burnley and Oldham. There are deep-rooted difficulties in some of our towns, and we have a responsibility to address them. I do not part company from those who have identified **faith** schools as an issue in the debate about why those disturbances occurred and how we bring together people from different religions, cultures and backgrounds. However, some people have claimed that **faith**-based education is the primary cause of such difficulties in communities and society. I do not accept that premise.

I remind the Committee of the basis on which a new school must apply if it wishes to establish itself in the maintained sector. It would have to apply to a local school organisation committee, which would then decide whether the creation of the new school was in the interests of, broadly, the local community and, narrowly, the family of schools. The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough knows that the Secretary of State has given some initial suggestions on the guidance that will be available to those committees, although more detail will follow. That guidance will make it clear that a new **faith**-based

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school must demonstrate either a partially inclusive admissions policy or, if it does not feel that that is appropriate, a commitment to and strategy for working with other schools in the area of another **faith** or no **faith**. A new school must be approved by the school organisation committee, which would make a statement about whether establishment of the school would be in the best interests of the local community. The decision would be made according to guidance from the Secretary of State, and would address the issues of collaboration and partnership and the need to bring young people of different religious and cultural backgrounds together. The introduction in September of citizenship education as a statutory part of the national curriculum will be an important step forward in encouraging young people to think about and discuss mutual respect and tolerance of people from different religious and cultural backgrounds.

I wish to conclude by telling the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough that his amendment will not achieve the objectives that he articulated in his lengthy presentation. The legislation gives admission forums the power to form a view and express an opinion on admissions criteria for all schools, including **faith** schools. They will not be able to change admissions policies, but they will be able to express an opinion, which must be taken into account by the school. However, responsibility for

admissions policy will remain with the school. On that basis, I ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw the amendment.

Mr Andrew Turner: . . . I share with the hon. Gentleman a great interest in the future of religious schools and in the Government's proposals for the creation of more **faith** schools. I do not necessarily share his opinions, but I share his interest. The issues could have been discussed under new clause 4 had he not withdrawn it from the amendment paper, as I assume he did. However, he raised several issues at enormous length, and I wish to deal with some of them.

The hon. Gentleman argued with the assertion of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and

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Sale, West that he not only wanted to amend the admissions policies of **faith** schools, but the Liberal Democrats objected to the transmission of **faith** within the maintained sector. Speaking from a sedentary position, he denied that that was the case. My hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West responded and referred to admissions policies. As the Minister said from a sedentary position—I, too, put it on record—the Liberal Democrat spokesman in the Committee does not think it appropriate that **faith** schools should be used for the transmission of **faith**.

11.15 am

If the hon. Gentleman believes that I have misrepresented him, perhaps he will say so. I seem to have got it right.

The hon. Gentleman consistently denied the Minister's assertion about his reasons for objecting to the admissions policies of **faith** schools. The Minister said, fairly, that if one wishes so effectively to undermine the admissions policies of state schools, there must be a jolly good reason for doing so, and he thought that perhaps that jolly good reason was that **faith** schools were so damaging to communities that they should be destroyed. That was what the Minister asserted that the hon. Gentleman believed. The hon. Gentleman denied it but he gave no other reason. In the absence of any other reason being given by the Liberal Democrats, we must draw our own conclusions. I should be happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman if he wants to give a reason.

The Liberal Democrats have been hostile to **faith** schools since time immemorial, certainly since 1870. I remind the hon. Gentleman that **church** schools existed in this country and were doing an excellent job long before the state education system was born or even thought of and it is no good his pretending, without reason, that he can undermine **faith** schools as new clause 4 and the amendment propose. There must be a reason, and I want to know what it is. The only reason that the hon. Gentleman has given is that some children who are nearer to a **faith** school than others who happen to be of the **faith** may be turned away. If that is his reason, if he is saying that we have to draw a line round the London Oratory school—I take that example at random because I was speaking to the headmaster last night—and it admits, say, 240 boys a year—

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Mr Andrew Turner: . . . Parents in those areas have to hope to be lucky enough to get their children into **faith** schools, because they do not have sufficient confidence in the community schools available to express first preference for any of them. . . . Think how difficult it must be for parents in inner London boroughs who know that they are not of the Catholic **faith** and cannot apply to Catholic schools, know that they do not live near to perhaps the single community school that is not failing, does not have serious weaknesses or does not lack the confidence of the local community, and are not fortunate enough to gain admission for their children to city academies.

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Mr Andrew Turner : . . . I propose that we insert two separate definitions of religious education that apply to maintained nursery schools and to nursery provision. The first definition,

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which relates to maintained nursery schools, applies the local agreed syllabus as it would broadly be taught in nursery classes in primary schools according to the age, ability and aptitude of the pupils. That is uncontroversial. The second definition would make suggestions about nursery settings, which are clumsily called "funded nursery education otherwise than at a maintained school or maintained nursery school".

The nursery settings are not involved in the creation of the agreed syllabus. However, in some cases they are provided by religious organisations and in other cases by secular organisations. They provide for a wide range of pupils, who would be drawn in some areas from a large number of communities and in others from quite a homogeneous community. There are many settings [in which maintained nursery education takes place] associated with Catholic primary schools in my constituency, as there are few nursery schools but many pre-school playgroups, as they used to be called, that are associated with primary schools. One can imagine that the pupils in such a setting will be mainly Roman Catholic. It would therefore be appropriate that the religious education that is delivered in that setting should be consistent with the Roman Catholic **faith**. Similarly, it might be appropriate for the education provided in a setting associated with a mosque to be consistent with the Muslim **faith**.

In areas where the pupils are drawn from mixed communities where there is no prevalent religion or religious tradition, it would be appropriate for the Christian religion to be taught in a way that the provider believes is consistent with pupils' religious heritage and their age, ability and aptitude. The amendment is designed to discover the Government's intentions for religious education in nursery schools and nursery settings and to set out proposals appropriate for pupils of this age. I have not sought to apply the whole agreed syllabus in nursery settings because some **faith**

groups expect their **faith** to be promoted and I do not want to compete with or contradict their wishes in that respect.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I apologise for arriving slightly late to this afternoon's sitting.

I vigorously oppose both amendments and I hope that the Minister will oppose them as strongly as I do. If we start bringing religious education into early years settings, where are we going to end up? The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) argued that faiths should be promoted in such settings, but I can think of nothing worse than a state-funded system that allows children in the Welsh valleys, for example, to be indoctrinated in a particular denomination at so young an age. I hope that the Minister will vigorously oppose that.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight for tabling the amendment because it will show where the Government stand on early years religious education. . . .

I trust that the Minister will not only oppose the amendments but state clearly that the Government will not support state-funded religious indoctrination in nursery schools.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell): I rise in response to the substance and the principle of the amendment. I am unsympathetic to the amendment, but not on grounds of the principle outlined by the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), whose concerns about religious education in schools I find disturbing. I ask him whether it is inappropriate for teachers in a nursery school celebrating Christmas to read pupils the Christmas story? Is any element of religious explanation inappropriate when Christmas or any other religious festival is being celebrated in a pre-school environment?

Mr. Willis: If the hon. Gentleman reads Hansard tomorrow, he will see that I did not say that. He should spend some time in early years settings [Interruption.] I apologise, I meant in order to gain a grasp of what goes on in those settings. Of course it is right and proper for a nursery school in Leicester, for example, to make Diwali celebrations part and parcel of what it provides, irrespective of whether a pupil is from a Christian family, of no **faith** or whatever. The notion of an early years school in the Rhondda valley celebrating Christmas is a wholly different issue from the state providing an RE syllabus to prescribe what should be taught. There is a difference between celebrating **faith** and the aim of the amendment, which is about promoting **faith** in early years settings.

Chris Grayling: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that clarification, but I find his comments rather patronising. I have visited many early years settings in recent weeks and taken a close interest in the problems that they face as a result of an overbearing curriculum being imposed by the Government.

Mr. Willis: It would be even more overbearing under the amendment.

Mr. Turner: That is why my hon. Friend is criticising it.

Chris Grayling: However well intentioned, the amendment is inappropriate because I am concerned about the way in which central Government continue to impose rules, regulations and curriculum guidelines on early years settings. I hope that we will have a

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further opportunity to debate the provisions that set out curriculum requirements for early years education, which should be opposed to the hilt. In this particular case, an addition to the curriculum—already unwanted—would be undesirable. I have no problem with guidance suggesting that early years organisations should feel free to deal with religious issues, celebrate religious festivals and make young children aware of their religious context.

Will the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough assure me that his party is not seeking to remove religion from our schooling? Several of his comments gave me the greatest possible doubt about his party's level of support for religious education.

Mr. Willis: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman takes such a close interest in Liberal Democrat policy. He raises a fair point, so let me assure him that that is not my party's intention. He was not a member of the Conservative Government when they introduced post-1988 the idea of clarifying religious education. They wanted to achieve consensus about how religious education should be taught in schools and the religious syllabus. That was all positive. The dividing line comes with indoctrination. That is where we cross from educating young people about religion in its broader sense—that must be a multi-faith approach, because we live in a multi-faith society—and using the state system to indoctrinate people in a particular faith.

Those two viewpoints are fundamentally different. As a practising Christian, I do not want religious education removed from schools, but my party and I are determined to ensure that other faiths are equally celebrated, and that young people have an understanding of faiths throughout the world, and the benefits and virtues that those faiths—

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Mr Andrew Turner: . . . Clause 75 makes it clear that the Secretary of State must secure that certain functions of the national curriculum, including religious education and worship, are provided in nursery classes. With the exception of nursery schools and funded nursery education, it makes it clear that those requirements apply to nursery classes in primary schools. If the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough felt so strongly about religious indoctrination, as he put it, in early years education, I am surprised that he did not table an amendment to delete the requirement.

I find it extraordinary that the hon. Gentleman described what I was saying as requiring the promotion of faith, because it does not. The promotion of faith may be one intention with which, for example, the Roman Catholic Church establishes a

playgroup in association with a Roman Catholic primary school, but the point is about religious education. There is no gap between us on that. I do not see any danger of indoctrination in the valleys or other parts of the United Kingdom, but I worry that he does

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not seem to appreciate that, although the early learning goals and desirable outcomes do not specify a curriculum in detail, they specify some points about what the Secretary of State is putting a considerable amount of money into and the reasons why she is doing that.

I noted carefully the comments of the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, but I am concerned that he is once again showing a certain hostility to religious education. The amendment would do no more than requiring all nursery schools and early years settings to do what the best do—that is not an unreasonable aspiration—and give a basic understanding of, for example, the Christmas story, if they are in association with a Christian school or if there is no prevalent faith in that setting, or other stories where the provision is by another faith group.

In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Mr. Grayling), I accept that there is a danger of over-regulation of the early years system. Indeed, I said as much in a debate in Westminster Hall. However, the spiritual development of youngsters is one of the most important functions with which we can assist, and I am concerned about the conflict between an all-embracing, a la carte view of religious education, which is far more than youngsters of that age are usually capable of accepting, and a clear understanding of the faith in which they have been brought up or, if they have not been brought up in any faith, the prevalent faith in this country. That said, the Minister has succeeded, at least, in bridging the gap between him and me, although the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough is still perhaps a little way off. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.