

**SOME COMMENTS ON THE TREATMENT OF EDUCATION IN  
NORTHERN IRELAND IN THE PUBLICATION  
"SECTARIANISM - A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT"**

Whilst welcoming this attempt by the Working Party to confront the Churches with the issue of sectarianism, one cannot but avoid recording, in the interests of justice and truth, several considerable reservations about the treatment of education in Northern Ireland in the areas (i) of process, and (ii) interpretation.

**PROCESS**

Of the Protestant members of the Working Party, none would appear to have relevant experience of the controlled schools in Northern Ireland, either in terms of teaching or management. The Working Party did not contact any of the three main Protestant Churches' Boards of Education for any comment on this issue. This lack of consultation is to be regretted *in extremis* and is especially so at this period of considerable change in education in Northern Ireland

**INTERPRETATION OF EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION IN  
NORTHERN IRELAND**

The general thrust of the Appendix 9 (pp.153-158) would appear to be in support of the view of SACHR that there was systematic under-funding of Roman Catholic schooling. No attempt whatever is made to contextualise educational developments in Northern Ireland within the parallel developments of education in England and Wales - an immensely important comparison with Northern Ireland being part of the United Kingdom. The principle employed by successive Unionist governments in educational matters was that of parity with the U.K.

Other major omissions in the treatment of education in N.Ireland in this appendix include:

**(i) THE MAJOR INFLUENCE OF THE 1947 EDUCATION REFORM  
ACT UPON NORTHERN IRELAND SOCIETY.**

The passing of this Act brought about a major injection of capital into education - for training colleges, universities and new schools. No credit is given for the social emancipation which the 1947 Act provided across the community. For the first time ever free secondary and free university education became available on a widespread basis. This process moreso than anything else, it could be argued, led to the recognition of social inequalities as perceived by the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960's. This Act, paralleling the 1944 Act in Britain, was responsible for introducing change of immense magnitude in Northern Ireland society. It is dismissed in this document in two-and-a-half lines within the context of a conscience clause for teachers (p.154).

**(ii) INTERPRETATION OF FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS FOR  
SCHOOLS, 1930 ONWARDS**

Again, the document does not highlight the principle of parity with England and Wales. The Roman Catholic Church in Northern Ireland had to raise funds similar to any body in England and Wales at that time wishing to have the type of control over the schools which the Church desired.

One interpretation of the Church's action was that it did not wish to have its power of control lessened and it wished to protect that power. The document also ignores the fact that the Unionist administration in respect of schools ignored the Government of



Ireland Act's injunction that no religious body was to benefit from public funding. (Note that the Department of Education N.I. retained this ruling and refused to fund salaries and administration costs of Church headquarters youth work until the recent founding of Youth Link.)

### **(iii) PROTESTANT CHURCH REPRESENTATION ON SCHOOL COMMITTEES AND LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITIES**

The document is too glib in its treatment of the position of those Protestant Churches which transferred their schools. The Churches not only transferred their schools to take advantage for their communities of the public funding so generously offered, they were also prompted by a carrot and stick policy in respect of the management of secondary schools. In areas where a Protestant Church retained its primary school, it was automatically excluded from taking part in the transferor representation process for the management committee of the secondary school to which its primary pupils would go. This factor is every bit as important as funding in interpreting the stance of the Protestant Churches.

The document does not adequately treat the degree of representation on school boards or Area Boards. Those bodies transferring schools did so on the basis that not less than 50 per cent of the school committees subsequently formed should comprise of representatives of the transferrors. However, in subsequent education reforms to permit teacher and parent representatives to enter into the partnership system of management, the Protestant Churches accepted a reduction in their representation so that today the 'best-case' scenario for representation is of 4 members out of a 9-strong board, and this fraction drops considerably on the larger mainly secondary school boards.

The document is somewhat misleading in respect of the Local Education Authorities. It is a fact (not referred to in the document) that the Protestant Churches never received the allocation of seats on the L.E.A's to which they felt they were by law entitled. Part of the policy of successive Unionist administrations was to reserve seats on the L.E.A's (which were never taken up until the 1970's) for the representatives of the Roman Catholic Church in the event (recognised even then as unlikely) of the Church transferring its schools. It can be but a matter of conjecture as to the long-term effects and costs of this policy of abstentionism.

The allocation of places on current L.E.A's. (the Education and Area Boards) is based on enrolment. This has had the effect, e.g., in the Western Board area of reducing representation of the transferrer churches to only two places.

### **(iv) THE ESTABLISHMENT OF INTEGRATED SCHOOLS**

When the creation of integrated schools was first mooted, the position of the Protestant Churches was that Roman Catholic trustees and transferrer representatives should both be offered places in the management of integrated schools, together with representatives of parents, teachers and the L.E.A. This remains the position of these Protestant Churches.

In the event, the present legal situation demands that in the event of a Controlled school opting for integrated status, the transferrer rights are set aside for all time.

The Protestant Churches' view is informed by their acceptance that parental rights are foremost with respect to choosing the type of school for their children.



(v) **CREATIVE WORK IN EDUCATION BY THE CHURCHES AND EDUCATORS**

There is no mention in the document of several extremely important and very encouraging developments over the past twenty to thirty years. Amongst these are:

(a) the work of the **Christian Education Movement**. C.E.M. is supported by the three Protestant Churches' boards of education, includes Roman Catholic and Protestant educators on its Council and with the support of the Department of Education, has expanded its programme of inter-school contacts, day and residential conferences. C.E.M. has sought to enable sixth-formers in particular to recognise the theological thinking and interpretations which can be applied to a range of issues. The General Secretary is Rev. Dr. G. Gray and he is assisted by a Roman Catholic religious and a Protestant, both of whom have educational experience and qualifications.

(b) the **R.E. core-curriculum process** and the follow-up work on producing non-statutory guidelines. This enabled the four main Churches to make a major breakthrough in this area. That this was possible is in no small way due to previous experience of cross-community development work in R.E., including e.g., the 11-16 programme, contact bases such as the Belfast Teachers' Centre, the closer links between the teacher training colleges and Queen's University with the sharing of expertise in R.E. related areas. The study of two traditions for the Northern Ireland Schools' Examination Council's G.C.S.E. examination in R.E., has also made its contribution together with a host of local projects such as heritage trails for schools visiting church buildings and frequently meeting clergy of the different Christian denominations.

Insufficient credit is given in this document to the work of Christian educators of all denominations in this vital area which enables sectarianism to be questioned at critical stages in a pupil's life.

**OTHER POINTS**

1. The use of the term 'State' school by a body appointed by the Churches is to be regretted. This terminology does not appear in any legislation and its use tends to undermine the church-relatedness and the ethos of the controlled schools which the various Protestant Church Boards have sought to protect and nurture.

2. With regard to the references in the document to the lower percentage of Roman Catholic people in engineering, it has been acknowledged elsewhere that Roman Catholic schools were slower to develop a comprehensive approach to the teaching of science-based subjects. Is it fair to suggest that this was not solely due to the high cost of equipping such teaching facilities but due to a theological stance which was suspicious of the sciences, as evidenced by the treatment of some academics?

3. The document does not pay a necessary well-merited tribute to the role of the teaching profession in Northern Ireland schools over the past 25 years. Schools on the whole have been maintained as places of peace in turbulent times and contributed to the promotion of spiritual values in society when they were being set aside through violence.