

NOTE FOR THE RECORD - SHARED SCHOOLS

This minute summarises recent discussion on shared schools.

Background

2. In 1974 Mr. Basil McIvor, the then Minister of Education, put forward a proposal whereby schools would be set up with representatives of both Protestant and Catholic churches on their governed body. Under the proposal those parents who wished would be able to send their children to these schools. Interested parties were invited to comment on the idea and it was found that there was insufficiently broad support for the idea to justify going ahead with it. The proposal was therefore allowed to lapse.

3. The matter was raised again at the recent Oxford Conference by Lady Fisher on behalf of All Children Together. In his winding up speech on that occasion the Secretary of State said that there would be a "conference" set up to discuss the idea further.

4. When the Secretary of State had dinner with Ministers and Officials in Stormont House on 15 July this was discussed and the following conclusions was reached.

a. That the Government should not organise a conference directly.

b. That consideration be given to inspiring some independent body to mount a properly prepared conference (eg QUB Institute of Education).

c. That no conference should take place for about 3 months, since it is important that the public debate on the Consultative Document should not get mixed up with such a hot potato.

d. It would be possible to discuss the format of an independent conference with the varied interests in the intervening period.

Mr. Moyle was in agreement with these and in particular was most keen that discussion on shared schools should be kept separate from the proposed public debate on secondary reorganisation.

Meeting with Lady Fisher, Mrs. Robins, and Brian Garrett

5. Mr. Moyle began the process of preliminary consultation by meeting the three leading members of the All Children Together movement in Stormont on 22 July. Lady Fisher began the meeting by saying that she had been delighted when the Secretary of State "generously and remarkably" replied to her speech during the Oxford Conference - and she hoped that Mr. Moyle would follow up the suggestion that there should be a further conference on the matter. Mr. Moyle replied that he had noted the resurgence of public interest in shared schools and was open to suggestions about how best to proceed.

6. Lady Fisher said that she hoped that the creation of shared schools would do something to break down sectarian tension in Northern Ireland and would make a small contribution towards bringing about peace.

/ 7. Mr. Garrett then handed to the Minister a paper (attached) which set out two broad objectives.

(a) To make maximum use of facilities within the existing educational systems involving sharing of specialist teachers, equipment, out of school activities etc.

(b) To enable those parents who wished (and Mr. Garrett said that these were at the moment not many) to send their children to an integrated school.

As to how to proceed towards this Mr. Garrett thought that a conference should be set up under the auspices of government and chaired either by Mr. Moyle or Secretary of State. The purpose of this conference would be to identify attitudes and to encourage public discussion; Mr. Garrett envisaged a standing conference which would meet regularly over a period of, say, 3 months; the conference would be attended by the Government, educational administrators, teachers, and parents, although he admitted it would be difficult to find representative examples of this last category.

8. Mr. Moyle thanked Mr. Garrett and promised to study the paper which he had been given. However he said there were several difficulties in the approach which had been outlined. Primary amongst these was that if a conference was set up those participating might be forced into expressing their position publicly at the outset and subsequently not being able to move from it because of the public commitment which had been given. (Mr. Moyle said that there was a close parallel here to the Constitutional Convention). In this light he hoped Mr. Garrett realised that progress was already being made towards his first objective (that of sharing facilities justified by local circumstances) but that this progress might be jeopardised if there were an acrimonious public debate on the matter which would heighten sectarian feeling rather than lessen it. Moving on to his second proposal (that of the creation of a new type of shared school) Mr. Moyle said there would obviously be strong objections to this suggestion and that to discuss it in the public arena would only make those who objected stand even firmer on their positions.

9. Mr. Garrett accepted this and said he realised that the Catholic church might be an obstacle. However he did not feel that Cardinal Conway spoke with the backing of the Catholic community, nor did he accept that the Cardinal was in any way bound by Canon Law to oppose the scheme. He thought that the type of conference he had suggested would serve to mobilise public opinion on the issue and force a widespread re-examination of public positions. Mr. Moyle replied that he had not yet decided whether or not to hold a conference as such but he was thinking about the best way in which constructive public discussion could be encouraged. Mr. Garrett replied sharply that he had received a letter from Mr. Darlington of the Northern Ireland Office which committed the

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Government to the holding of a conference and he hoped that Mr. Moyle would be acting in accordance with this letter. He also said that he felt the Minister ought to know that he had the backing of many influential newspapers in GB and Northern Ireland - notably the Belfast Telegraph, the Sunday Times and the New Statesman, and that editorial pressure would be brought on the Government to be seen to act on shared schools. Mr. Moyle thanked the delegation for coming to talk to him and promised to be in touch when he had taken further soundings.

#### Meeting with Cardinal Conway

10. Following this meeting Mr. Moyle travelled to Armagh to meet Cardinal Conway, Bishop Philbin, and Bishop Daly. Mr. Moyle began the meeting by explaining that the issue of shared schools had once more become a focus of public interest and that there was now pressure for the setting up of a conference. Mr. Moyle added that the idea of shared schools was instantly appealing to people of good intention who knew nothing of the realities of Northern Ireland, and foremost among such people were the middle-class liberal English journalists whom Brian Garrett numbered among his allies. As far as he himself was concerned, the Minister confirmed that he had taken no decisions but was merely taking preliminary soundings among interested parties; however there would be pressure on him to set up a conference and, given that the Roman Catholic church would be expected to attend such a conference, he asked for the Cardinal's views.

11. Cardinal Conway's attitude was of complete intransigence. He dismissed the idea as trivial, irrelevant, and without popular support; he would not participate in any conference on the matter which would be set up by liberals for liberals and would be so constructed as to put the Catholic Hierarchy "in the dock" (he described Lady Fisher's scheme as an "ambush"). He affirmed that his church attached the very highest importance to Catholic children continuing to be educated in Catholic schools - this was embodied in Canon Law, had been endorsed by the Vatican Council, and was the only way in which a stable environment could be created where children could learn about the meaning of life and the rules of principled human conduct. He thought that to take a child from a Catholic home and educate that child in a non-Catholic school would create tension between the home and school environment which could only be harmful to the child. This might not be the case in middle-class areas such as Holywood (both Cardinal Conway and Bishop Philbin spoke with particular scorn of Holywood as a kind of North Down Hampstead) but it certainly applied in the big housing estates, where Catholic schools were a great force for peace-teaching love, non-violence, and the importance of the family; it would be folly to destroy this and replace it by an unwanted and disruptive system of shared schools. Summing up the Cardinal said they would object to shared schools, would not attend an open conference to discuss them, and would wage a campaign to fight any proposal which set out to relax the hold of the Catholic Church on the education of its own children. He said that he was sure that all his clergy supported his views.

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12. Mr. Moyle thanked the Cardinal for his frank statement. He then referred to Mr. Garrett's two-tier suggestion, whereby the first stage would be to share facilities and the second would be actual integration. Bishop Philbin replied that he did not object to the sharing of facilities and extra-curricular activities where specific circumstances necessitated such arrangements but he could not endorse it as a principle to be generally applied. Bishop Daly then made the same points as the Cardinal but with even more vigour. He referred to a meeting with some children educated in non-Catholic schools whom he had asked about the meaning of Christmas - they had variously replied that it was to celebrate the birth of Santa Claus and the death of Christ. If Christian values were to be protected, he concluded, then Catholic schools must be retained. In England children were taught about all religions - including Bhuddism and even Communism - this could only be confusing and children in Northern Ireland wanted stability not confusion. Furthermore he suggested the Minister would find that when pressed the Protestant churches would be similarly opposed to this scheme - indeed the only people in favour of it were the "minute crowd in Holywood".

13. In reply to a question from Mr. Moyle both Cardinal Conway and his Bishops said that a conference would be divisive and would do nothing to help sectarian feeling. They suggested that as it was not in the best interests of community relations to hold an open conference Mr. Moyle might hold a series of consultations (such as he was having at the moment) over the coming months and, once these were completed, he might issue a statement. Mr. Moyle said that he would think over all that he had been told, and keep the Cardinal up to date with his thinking.

#### The future

14. Mr. Moyle has still not taken any firm decisions on whether or not there should be a conference and, if there is, on what form it will take. A letter has been received from the British-Irish Association offering to hold a conference themselves. One course of action is for the Minister to hold consultations while conferences are held by other bodies such as this. All this is under consideration. Mr. Moyle's position is that contained in the answer to this week's PQs:

"It is not the intention of the Government to deprive parents of the right to have their children educated in accordance with their religious choice. A proposal for shared school governing bodies was made by Mr. Basil McIvor, Minister for Education in the power sharing executive, in May 1974".

"Consultation on this proposal subsequently did not reveal sufficient support to warrant legislation. I have noted a recent renewal of interest in similar proposals to those put forward by Mr. McIvor and I am at present reviewing how these might be further considered."

*John Pitt-Brooke*

J. PITT-BROOKE  
PS/Mr. Moyle  
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