

## RISC EMAIL TO VINCE CABLE 2 AUG 11

----- Original Message -----

**From:** [home@jrodell.com](mailto:home@jrodell.com)

**To:** [cablev@parliament.uk](mailto:cablev@parliament.uk)

**Sent:** Tuesday, August 02, 2011 9:44 AM

**Subject:** SECONDARY SCHOOL: REQUEST FOR URGENT COMMUNICATION WITH SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION

Dear Dr Cable,

I am writing as a Twickenham constituent, and coordinator of Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign\*, to request your urgent action on a specific issue in relation to the proposed Catholic school.

Having read your column in this week's Informer, we do not expect your wholehearted support for our position, which is that any new school capacity should be inclusive, especially in terms of admissions, so that children are not denied access to a good local school because of the religion or beliefs of their parents. But we were pleased to see your comment that "*... in order to reconcile the faith mission of the churches with the needs of the local community, a good proportion of places be set aside for residents regardless of religion*".

### **Need for urgent action**

However, this option may not remain available unless urgent action is taken. **We would like to ask you to request Michael Gove either to support the request in the attached letter not to grant the Church "consent to publish proposals" for a Voluntary Aided (VA) school** or, at least, to ask him to give the matter his personal consideration. There are other, far better, options available, including other options for a Catholic school.

It is urgent because this is a closed process and we do not know when the Church will make its formal request for consent - it could be at any time from now on. And there is no public consultation.

### **Why this is important**

- Lord True stated at the Council Cabinet meeting on 21st July that the Church would seek consent from the Secretary of State to publish proposals for a Voluntary Aided school on the Clifden Road site.
- Under the 2006 Education Act, the Council would normally be obliged to hold a competition for a new school. This can be avoided under two conditions: if the new school is an Academy, or if the Secretary of State has granted consent to a Local Authority or church to publish proposals for a Voluntary Aided school. If consent is granted, a formal process has to be followed - including consultation. The decision then lies with the Local Authority. There is apparently no means to appeal.
- In this case, given Lord True's passionate support, it is almost inconceivable that the Council would decide that the VA school should not go ahead, regardless of the "consultation".
- So in practice, while the decision is formally a local one, if Michael Gove gives consent in this case, he will have decided that the Catholic VA school should go ahead.

As indicated in my letter, there are three reasons why he should refuse consent:

1. A Catholic VA school will not help alleviate a critical shortage of places in the borough: On the basis of the Council's own forecasts, there will be a critical shortage of secondary school places in the borough unless new schools are urgently provided. The data also support the Council's assumption that a new Catholic VA school will fill almost entirely with children who would otherwise attend out of borough Catholic secondaries (there are 8 of them within a 5 mile radius of the centre of the borough). It will therefore do little to free-up places in other local schools. A second new school will still be urgently needed (see chart in the letter) - we know that the Council is seeking a site for one - and, using the Council's own demand forecast, we calculate that a third school will be required by 2017/18. This is why Councillor Eady, for the local LibDems, has said that although they support a Catholic school in principle, they do not think that it should be given priority at this stage.

2. It is inconsistent with Government policy on Academies. We take no view on the desirability or otherwise of Free School and Academies. But the fact is that Government policy is strongly to promote them. The Council's own policy is *"to support all Richmond upon Thames schools to become academies over a three year period"*. To aim for a VA school rather than an Academy is therefore a glaring inconsistency at both levels.
3. It is inconsistent with Government policy on inclusive admissions. The Coalition Agreement stated (repeated in a recent Education Department paper on faith schools): *"We will ensure that all new Academies follow an inclusive admissions policy. We will work with faith groups to enable more faith schools and facilitate inclusive admissions policies in as many of these schools as possible."* (I assume the emphasis on inclusiveness was put there by LibDem negotiators.) This was followed by Michael Gove's decision to limit the faith-based admissions in new Academies and Free Schools to 50%. Catholic Church policy is to support conversion of existing VA schools into Academies where appropriate, as they are allowed to retain their existing admissions policies, so they have no problem with the Academy structure.  
The reason why a VA school is proposed in this case and not an Academy is to circumvent the 50% faith-based admissions restriction for new Academies. (In fact it can be speculated that the reason why this proposal is moving quickly is that the new Education Bill currently going through Parliament is expected to require the first option for a new school to be an Academy or Free School, closing off the loophole.)

### Options

There are effectively four options here, all funded totally or almost totally by the taxpayer:

1. An inclusive school (which could be an Academy or, subject to competition, a Community school) in terms of admissions, employment and balanced religion/belief teaching
2. A Catholic school (probably an Academy) with fully inclusive admissions
3. A Catholic school (probably an Academy) with a maximum of 50% faith-based admissions
4. A Catholic Voluntary Aided school, with admissions (and employment) policies controlled by the church-dominated governing body. An example of a typical Admissions Policy is attached.

If Michael Gove does not grant consent for proposals to be published under Option 4, the other three options remain available. All three would offer the same potential for a high quality school for Twickenham, and all would be in line with government policy.

- Option 1 is effectively the local LibDem's preference for this first site, as they support the concept of a Catholic school, but not as a first priority.

We would like to see inclusive capacity increased so that sufficient places at good quality schools are available for all, and at the same time a reform of the Linked Schools system so that parents of children at Catholic primaries are not discriminated against - as most of them are currently - if they seek places at good local Community secondaries and Academies. That would be fair.

- Options 2 and 3 would still provide for a Catholic school while adhering to government policy on Academies and inclusion.
- Option 3 is effectively the option you have proposed.

It might be argued that a VA school could choose to adopt an admissions policy providing *"a good proportion of places...for residents regardless of religion"*. However, there would be no guarantee that the governing body would not revise it a few years down the line. The vast majority of Twickenham parents who are not Catholics would hardly feel comfortable if the availability of school places for their children depended on the decisions of a body in which the Catholic Church had a built-in majority, especially when more secure arrangements were available.

We urge you to raise this issue with Michael Gove at the earliest opportunity and suggest to him that the interests of your constituents would be better served if consent were not granted, and other options were considered by the Local Authority.

Regards,

Jeremy Rodell  
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East Twickenham  
TW1 2HF

\*Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign [www.richmondinclusiveschools.org.uk](http://www.richmondinclusiveschools.org.uk) is not anti-religious or party-political. We include people from a wide range of backgrounds and beliefs, many of them parents, including school governors, Catholics, Anglicans, Jews, Humanists and others. We have only been in existence since earlier this year but have already gained several hundred supporters, despite so far not having held a public meeting or raised a petition. More people are supporting us all the time as they wake up to what is happening.

Speaking personally, I am the Chair of SW London Humanists and a member of Richmond Inter Faith Forum. While my own preference would be for no state-funded faith schools, that is not the objective of the campaign or of this email.