

PRESS RELEASE – RICHMOND INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN

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Vince Cable Challenged Department on Catholic Schools

Vince Cable heavily criticised the Department for Education for their intervention in the Catholic schools court case, which he said contradicted the 2010 Coalition Agreement between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats.

The Agreement commits the government to *“work with faith groups to enable more faith schools and facilitate inclusive admissions policies in as many of these schools as possible.”*

But in a witness statement, David McVean, a senior official at the DfE, claimed the Education Act 2011, which came into force in February, not only promoted Academies/free schools, but was also intended to make voluntary aided schools easy to set up. One of the main reasons he gave was that *“In some cases... religious organisations will not wish to establish an Academy. This is mainly because only 50% of places can be prioritised on the basis of faith if that Academy is oversubscribed.”* Voluntary aided schools, such as the new St Richard Reynolds Catholic secondary, can go up to 100%.

In a strongly worded letter sent prior to the court hearing to David Laws, the LibDem Minister for Schools, Dr Cable said:

“A serious problem has arisen whereby DfE officials, in evidence to a court case, appear to be acting in contradiction of the Coalition Agreement in relation to faith schools and contrary to the express intention of the Education Act 2011.....

“For the record, I and the Richmond Liberal Democrat Council Group have supported the proposal for a new catholic school but argued that it should be inclusive (i.e. 50:50 admission). This was in line with the presumption in favour of 50% in favour of 50% faith-based admission in new academies in the Act, and the Coalition Agreement.

Can you intervene with the Department to rectify this situation?”

The Department ignored Dr Cable’s request. Their lawyer put forward their argument during the High Court case, and the judge accepted their overall interpretation of the new Act.

Rabbi Jonathan Romain, Chair of the Accord Coalition, which has been backing Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign (RISC) said: “Children should not be selected by schools according to faith. It is highly discriminatory and sends a terrible message to the children themselves about the sort of society we are trying to create. It also begs questions about the core values of any faith that wants to shut the doors on others. Britain today is multi-belief, but we don’t want that to become a multi-fractious society. State funded schools should not help to segregate and entrench religious division, but should instead be open to all children, regardless of religion or philosophy. We therefore call on the Government to fulfil its commitment to facilitate inclusive admissions policies. Schools’ conduct should be exemplary, and religious discrimination should form no part of their life.”

However, Greg Pope, the deputy director of the Catholic Education Service, has recently asked Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education to remove even the 50% cap on faith-based selection at new academies/free schools. He said that it acted as a “perverse disincentive” to set up new Catholic academies/free schools. He added that a loophole in the rules meant that the Church could set up a traditional voluntary aided school and then convert it to an academy to “get around” the cap. But he said: “That seems to me – to put it mildly – not the best way of doing it.”

RISC have cited evidence that that this was the intention for the new Catholic schools in Twickenham from the start.

Notes for Editors:

Vince Cable letter to David Laws of 9 Nov 12

http://www.richmondinclusiveschools.org.uk/files/view/legal-challenge/Vince_Cable_letter_to_David_Laws_9_Nov_12.pdf

Witness Statement on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education by David McVean

http://www.richmondinclusiveschools.org.uk/files/view/legal-challenge/DfE_submission_-_25_Oct_12_David_McVean.pdf - see para 37 on page 12 of the file, page 10 of the witness statement. (Note: the claimants cited on the title pages are incorrect. They were Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign and the British Humanist Association.)

Coalition Agreement (see page 29 second column, second bullet)

http://www.richmondinclusiveschools.org.uk/files/view/other-useful-documents/Coalition_Agreement_dg_187876.pdf

Daily Telegraph report of 27 Nov 12 quoting Greg Pope

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9704078/Catholic-Church-snub-to-Michael-Goves-flagship-free-schools-plans.html>

Evidence that the intention for the new Catholic schools was “get around” the 50% rule by proposing a voluntary aided school with 100% selection and then converting it to an Academy later is given in this internal DfE document (para 7) obtained via a Freedom of Information request:

http://www.richmondinclusiveschools.org.uk/files/view/other-useful-documents/diocese-consent-application/DfE_FOI_-_recommendation_on_consent_to_publish_proposals_for_secondary_school.pdf