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Dear Archbishop Nichols,

I am writing about two points from the speech you were reported¹ to have made to mark the opening of the new St. Richard Reynolds schools in Twickenham.

Human Rights

The Telegraph's headline in its print edition of 19th Sep was "Grants for faith schools are a human right, says archbishop". It is not clear from the report whether you actually said that, but that was the clear implication of your reported remarks about parental rights "enshrined in European Conventions". Oona Stannard did the same in a letter sent to Richmond Councillors in September 2011.

[The European Convention on Human Rights](#). Protocol 1 Article 2 is the Right to Education. It states: "No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions."

This ensures that the state cannot prevent parents from seeking to educate their children in line with their convictions (balanced by the need to protect the rights of children). The government cannot, for example, prevent anyone setting up a Muslim school teaching Creationism (there are quite a few), or a school using the Accelerated Christian Education method, where God has the views of the US Religious Right and, until very recently, the Loch Ness monster was cited as evidence against evolution (there are also a several of these schools in this country).

But it does not require the state itself to provide and/or finance such schools, or indeed to provide for any and every other "religious and philosophical conviction" held by parents – that would be impossible. And it certainly does not give anyone a right to require the state to fund schools that can discriminate between children in admissions on the basis of their parents' beliefs – the core issue in the Richmond case. If it did, then almost all the other countries in Europe would be in violation: according to the OECD², England (and Wales) is exceptional in having faith-based selection at state-funded schools - the only other OECD countries where it identifies this as happening are Estonia, Israel and Ireland. In our case it is only possible because of an exemption in equalities legislation.

¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/10318950/State-backed-faith-schools-a-precious-right-says-Archbishop.html>

² http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/school-choice-and-equity_5k9fq23507vc-en

There are, of course, sincerely held views for and against both state-funded faith schools in general - on which RISC is neutral³ - and faith-based selection, which is the key concern for RISC and now the national Fair Admissions Campaign. But it is misleading to claim, or imply, that there is a “human right” of access to state-funded Catholic schools with exclusive over-subscription criteria.

Sowing division

You were also reported as accusing those who opposed the establishment of the new schools in Twickenham of trying to “sow division” in the community. Of course, from our viewpoint, any division was caused by those who wanted to use a scarce site to establish a state-funded secondary school that will be effectively closed to 85-90% of the local community. But, setting that aside, it implies that anyone who stands up for what they see as right, whether it is about school inclusivity, a third runway at Heathrow, gay marriage, gender equality or freedom of worship under Communism, is “sowing division” and, presumably, that they should simply give up.

In my view, while it is important not to shy away from genuine differences, it is equally important – but sometimes not easy - for those involved to see each other as fellow human beings and to do their best to be fair in their arguments and methods. RISC certainly tried to do that in the campaign over the new schools, and continues to do so in its current work. With a few notable exceptions, that was largely reciprocated.

We live in a dynamic, plural society which is probably the most secular in Europe in a practical - as opposed to constitutional - sense. That does not mean a society in which faith has no role. But it does mean that faith-based privilege, of which state-funded schools that are closed to many children on religious grounds are a prime example, will become more and more unacceptable.

This may be a naïve hope, but perhaps the Church, with its new leadership, could surprise us by taking the lead in changing to a fairer arrangement at its schools, fit for 21st century Britain, rather than waiting for change to be forced upon it.

Yours sincerely,

Jeremy Rodell – Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign

³ This is why RISC did not oppose the new St.Mary’s Hampton Anglican primary school, which opened at the same time a St.Richard Reynold’s, as it has fully inclusive admissions.