

SPEECH TO HUMANIST & SECULARIST LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

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Jeremy Rodell – Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign

Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign, RISC, was a response to Richmond Council's plans to set up a new exclusive Catholic secondary school, despite intense competition for places at many local community schools. We wanted any new school to be open to everyone. After a campaign lasting for nearly two years, we ended up last November with a Judicial Review at the High Court, pursued jointly with the British Humanist Association.

We lost. And the new, Voluntary Aided Catholic High School will open on a prime Council-owned site in Twickenham in September.

I'll like to say something brief about the campaign and what it revealed about the government's line, and then talk about its wider implications.

But first I need to explain a little about the context and the different types of faith schools.

As you know, the party's manifesto commitment to inclusivity is in part reflected in the Coalition Agreement, which says two things. Firstly: **"We will ensure that all new Academies follow an inclusive admissions policy"**. The result of that is a cap of 50% faith-based admissions that applies to all new Free Schools and Academies - not ideal, but a step in the right direction. The agreement then goes on to say: **"We will work with faith groups to enable more faith schools and facilitate inclusive admissions policies in as many of these schools as possible."** So the intent is clear: more inclusivity at faith schools.

Faith schools set their own admissions policies, but legally must accept any local children if they have spare places. The issue arises when they're over-subscribed, which many are.

There are four main types:

Voluntary Aided schools, and pre-existing schools that **convert to faith Academies** are both controlled by religious organisations and can have admissions policies giving anything up to 100% faith-based priority. Most faith schools are in one of these categories, including all Catholic schools.

Voluntary Controlled schools, mainly CofE primaries, comprise about a third of the total. They're controlled by the local authority, and normally have more inclusive admissions policies, though some are converting to Academies.

Finally faith-based **Free Schools, or new Academies** – they're effectively the same thing - have the 50% cap.

So in terms of inclusive admissions: Voluntary Aided and Academy conversions are often bad, Voluntary Controlled are usually ok, Free Schools/new Academies are limited to 50%.

There will be a short test later!

Our chances in the Richmond campaign were low from the outset. Against us were a Tory Council with a clear majority, headed by Lord True, who regards the Catholic school as a personal crusade, and the entire Catholic establishment, including all the local state funded Catholic primaries. All the other local schools remained neutral for fear of upsetting the Council and Catholic parents.

We got great support from some local LibDems, notably Arnie Gibbons, who's a local councillor and of course, HSLD's Treasurer. But the local party had backed the idea of a Catholic secondary when they were in power, so it didn't give us clear support.

Vince Cable is the Twickenham MP. Although he also didn't support us, he was aware of the anxiety among non-Catholic parents about places at good secondaries. I must give him credit for trying to reach a compromise, based on the 50% cap. He even got Michael Gove to agree that a Catholic VA school with a voluntary 50% cap was a reasonable idea. But the Church and the Council rejected it – they wanted 100%.

And unfortunately, the Department for Education intervened in the Judicial Review to support them.

The 2011 Education Act made the Free School/Academy structure the default for new schools. We thought that meant that any new faith school was subject to the 50% cap. But the DfE claimed in our court case that it was also a policy objective ***“to make it easier to establish voluntary aided schools”*** specifically because ***“In some cases...religious organisations will not wish to establish an Academy ... mainly because only 50% of places can be prioritised on the basis of faith if that Academy is oversubscribed.”***

So the DfE are deliberately subverting the inclusive intent of the Coalition Agreement. They're maintaining a loophole that allows new VA schools to be set up with 100% faith-based selection, with an option of conversion to Academies later. And that's exactly what Richmond Council and the Church have done.

The Department continued to maintain this line well after David Laws became the Minister for Schools, and still does. There's a big gap here between the high level policy and the practice, reflecting, I assume, the behind-the-scenes influence of the Catholic Church. A local campaign can't do anything about that.

RISC has made a big impact locally, and now we're turning attention to discrimination at existing schools, and gaining new supporters. In that sense we've done ok.

So let me say something about our approach. It's important as **a new national campaign on Fair Admissions** will soon be launched, and I believe it will apply some of the same thinking.

We **focus on the one thing that unites people from a wide range of backgrounds: faith-based discrimination in admissions.** That means we consciously separate this single issue from the wider issues around faith schools. RISC does not oppose faith schools per se. We're also very careful to avoid disrespecting people of faith by being anti-religious, or insulting to the beliefs of our opponents. Although I chair the local humanist group, most of the people involved are not humanists and we have Catholics among our many hundreds of supporters. We're formally supported by the Accord Coalition, headed by Rabbi Jonathan Romain, not the British Humanist Association - though we very much welcome the help the BHA has given us. We also stay out of the political debate on Free Schools and Academies, and simply accept them as a fact of life.

This inclusive approach, based on a laser-like focus on fair admissions has a lot of advantages.

Firstly, if phrased in the right way, the simple issue of fairness is **hard to argue with, ethically or emotionally**. We've kept repeating this question: ***"How can it be right for a state-funded school to turn away local children simply because of the religion or beliefs of their parents?"*** So far that's never been answered.

This is a basic equalities issue, no different in principle to race, gender or sexual orientation. What's happening is simply wrong. That's what motivates me personally. And we know that around 75% of the population people agree with me that it's wrong. People from many other countries can't believe it's legal.

And many religious people, including some clergy, agree that it's ethically indefensible. Even the Church of England's head of education, the Bishop of Oxford, would like to see more inclusive admissions in CofE schools – he ran into some trouble when he advocated a limit of 10%. It's a myth that faith schools must be selective: most Voluntary Controlled schools are already inclusive, and so are some other faith schools, including new ones.

Fair admissions to faith schools would also mitigate their impact on **social and community segregation**. It seems obvious that segregating children by religion in a plural society is a bad idea. And Last year the Guardian published an analysis showing that 64% of Anglican primaries, and 76% of Catholic primaries, had a lower proportion of children eligible for Free School Meals than the average for their local postcode. Coincidentally, one of the most extreme cases they found was a Catholic primary in the borough of Richmond, where the

Free School Meal percentage is now one fifth of the figure in a community primary in the same road.

The focussed approach, and the **increased choice it implies**, means that if parents want to apply to a state-funded faith school, they would be able to do so without feeling obliged to feign religious adherence. Fair admissions are not an existential threat to faith schools.

Now I know that may not feel comfortable to those who don't like faith schools at all, and are concerned about other important issues such as employment rights, sex education and RE. But a focus on the iniquity of faith-based selection does not prevent the other issues being tackled separately, either now or in the future. Arguably, success on admissions would make that easier.

Perhaps the biggest benefit of adopting this focussed approach nationally is that it is, I believe, **achievable**.

So what can Humanist & Secularist Liberal Democrats do to help?

At a local level there is a lot that can be done, provided **every local party is pushed to buy into the national policy**, and especially if, as I hope, other local campaigns like RISC get started as a result of the new Fair Admissions campaign I mentioned earlier.

I said before that most Voluntary Controlled schools are inclusive. But a 2011 study by Accord revealed that 25% of local authorities run non-inclusive Voluntary Controlled

schools¹. **HSLD members can ensure these are identified and picked up** by local councillors and school governors. If there are any cases of VC schools run by LibDem councils that fail to apply fully inclusive admissions policies, they need to be fixed.

Faith-based Academies, Voluntary Aided and Free Schools are more of a challenge. But they all have a variety of local people on their governing bodies. And as there are people of faith who support inclusive admissions, it's realistic in some cases to **seek increased inclusivity using the normal governance processes**. We have recently seen a case in a neighbouring borough where that has happened.

But this type of local action is a struggle while national legislation still permits state-funded schools to discriminate on the basis of religion. If someone proposed an NHS hospital that gave priority to Catholics, Jews or Muslims, there would be outrage. So why do we accept it in state-funded schools? Apart from the fact that we're simply accustomed to it, politicians are afraid to tackle it because they know they would provoke furious opposition.

But the gay marriage debate has shown that issues of principle can still be fought and won in this country.

An inclusive campaign for fair admissions to state-funded faith schools could attract a lot of popular support. Cleverly played, it could be a political opportunity. We need now to start creating the conditions so the national battle can be fought and won in the next Parliament.

¹ See Appendix

To do that, it's essential that the same commitment to inclusivity is in the LibDem manifesto for the next General Election as in 2010. And it's equally essential that the members of the top team understand and genuinely commit to it as an important feature of a **fairer society**, so that it would be actively pursued whenever the party negotiates or plays a role in government.

The rest of us can make it easier for them by taking every opportunity to bring the issue up to the point where it becomes unavoidable.

The question then is whether we have politicians who have the wisdom to see the justice of the case, and the courage to do something about it.

Appendix – Accord 2011 listing of LAs with selective Voluntary Controlled schools

<http://accordcoalition.org.uk/take-action/campaigning-for-inclusive-admissions-in-local-voluntary-controlled-faith-schools/>

EAST ANGLIA	EAST MIDLANDS	GREATER LONDON	NORTH EAST
SUFFOLK	DERBY	BEXLEY	GATESHEAD
HERTFORDSHIRE	DERBYSHIRE	CROYDON	
	LINCOLNSHIRE		
	LEICESTER CITY		
	NOTTINGHAMSHIRE		
NORTH WEST	SOUTH EAST		
BOLTON	BRACKNELL FOREST	WEST SUSSEX	MILTON KEYNES
CUMBRIA	HAMPSHIRE	SOUTHAMPTON	SLOUGH
ROCHDALE	ISLE OF WIGHT	WEST BERKSHIRE	PORTSMOUTH
	KENT	WINDSOR & MAIDENHEAD	WOKINGHAM
	MEDWAY	BUCKINGHAMSHIRE	
YORKS AND	WALES	SOUTH WEST	WEST MIDLANDS
BRADFORD	DENBIGHSHIRE	BOURNEMOUTH	BIRMINGHAM
	NEWPORT	CORNWALL	SANDWELL
	CARDIFF	DORSET	WOLVERHAMPTON
		GLOUCESTERSHIRE	WORCESTERSHIRE
		PLYMOUTH	WALSALL
		POOLE	STAFFORDSHIRE