

SPEECH TO ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY HUMANIST GROUP – 26 Feb 2013

We set up Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign, RISC, in response to Richmond Council's plans for a new exclusive Catholic secondary school. We wanted any new school to be open to everyone. The main campaign lasted for nearly two years and ended up last November with a Judicial Review at the High Court, pursued jointly with the BHA.

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

I'll try to give you a flavour for the campaign and its constraints, and then talk about what worked.

Our chances were low from the outset. Against us were: a Council with a clear majority, headed by Lord True, who regards the Catholic school as a personal crusade; local Catholic parents; the Catholic Education Service; the Catholic Diocese; the local Catholic churches and the Catholic primary schools. The other schools remained neutral for fear of upsetting the Council and Catholic parents.

Vince Cable is the Twickenham MP. Although he didn't support us, he was aware of the competition for places at good schools, and the anxiety among non-Catholic parents. I must give him credit for trying to reach a compromise, based on the 50% cap on faith based admissions that applies to new Free Schools and Academies. He even got Michael Gove to

agree that a Catholic VA school with a voluntary 50% cap was a good idea. But the Church and the Council wanted 100%.

The Department for Education intervened in the Judicial Review to support them. A submission by the Secretary of State claimed that a policy objective of the Education Act was ***“to make it easier to establish voluntary aided schools”***. That seems to contradict what the government said during the passage of the Bill. And the DfE’s key official said in a witness statement: ***“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.”*** The Catholic Education Service are quite open about using this loophole to get round the 50% cap by setting up a VA school first, with the option of converting it to an Academy later, as the cap doesn’t apply to conversions. The DfE are deliberately, and shamefully, keeping this loophole open.

A local campaign can’t do anything about that. Maybe you can.

We have been lucky to have capable and articulate people supporting us, and a member of the Cabinet as the local MP. We’ve made a big impact locally and now we’re turning attention to discrimination at existing schools. In that sense we’ve done ok. So let me say something about our approach, which could be useful elsewhere.

We have **focussed on the one thing that unites people from a wide range of backgrounds: faith-based discrimination in school admissions**. That means we have consciously separated this single issue from the wider issues around faith schools. RISC does not oppose

faith schools per se, and we didn't oppose a new local CofE primary, which has fully inclusive admissions.

The campaign itself is broad-based. We're very careful to avoid being anti-religious, or insulting to the beliefs of our opponents. Although I chair SW London Humanists and we got it started, there are people from a variety of religious backgrounds, including some Catholics, among the many hundreds of RISC supporters. We're formally supported by Accord, not the BHA - though we very much welcome the help the BHA has given us. Of course, that doesn't stop our opponents trying to characterise RISC as a humanist plot or, to quote Lord True, an "acolyte" of the BHA – a jibe that simply made everyone more annoyed with Lord True.

We've tried to stay out of party-politics, and have been careful to maintain separation between RISC and the LibDem opposition on the Council. But we do talk about social selection and segregation as a consequence of faith-based selection. Although these issues are less significant in Richmond than in some other areas, we have clear evidence of social selection at local faith schools, especially Catholic primaries.

But our prime focus has remained on **fair admissions**.

There's a simple question that I've put so many times that our core team is getting fed up with hearing it: ***"How can it be right for a state-funded school to turn away local children simply because of religion or beliefs of their parents?"*** So far, that's never been answered.

It's this great unfairness that motivates me personally. Faith-based discrimination in access to publicly-funded schools is just wrong. The polls show that most people agree it's wrong. People from many other countries can't believe it's legal.

As far as I can see, the problem is that it's too far down the political priority list, and seen as too politically toxic, to put it right.

But we've seen with the gay marriage issue - which I guess affects fewer people - that there is still principle in politics, and powerful forces can be faced down.

So I'd like to put in a plea for principled, focussed action in the next electoral cycle to drive down faith-based discrimination in admissions. There's a broad base of support out there, if someone is bold enough to go for it.

Jeremy Rodell