

INDEPENDENT STRATEGIC REVIEW OF EDUCATION (BAIN REVIEW (2006))

Alliance Party response to consultation paper by Sir George Bain

21 July 2006

1 BACKGROUND

- 1.1.1 On 8 March 2006, Secretary of State, Peter Hain, announced that Sir George Bain would lead a thorough review of Northern Ireland's education system, including how it is organised and financed. Mr Hain said the review would "look at how we best meet our duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education, which is a vital building block towards creating the conditions necessary for long-term peace and stability in Northern Ireland".
- 1.1.2 The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this review.

2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Alliance Party response to *A Shared Future* policy

- 2.1.1 Alliance wants to build a united community, characterised not by communal separation but by sharing.
- 2.1.2 Alliance is working for an open and free society, where we are all equal citizens—not a society where we merely tolerate difference, but rather a society where we celebrate diversity and cherish individuality. Only Alliance rejects the notion that we must all be pigeon-holed into 'two communities', and respects personal choice of identity. Alliance offers everyone, including unionists and nationalists, an invitation to something different, something better than sectional politics—a genuinely shared and non-sectarian future.
- 2.1.3 Accordingly, the Alliance Party extends a warm welcome to the publication and contents of *A Shared Future*, which represents a major step forward in the thinking of the Northern Ireland Office. In particular, *A Shared Future* begins to address the vision of building a united community.
- 2.1.4 We completely agree with declaration made in *A Shared Future*, in regards to the unsustainability of the provision of separate and segregated services:
- "Separate but equal is not an option. Parallel living and the provision of parallel services are unsustainable both morally and economically."
- 2.1.5 Alliance would go further and state that the provision of segregated services was never justified.
- 2.1.6 Healing the divisions in Northern Ireland is crucial not only for the betterment of society as a whole, but also the survival of the Agreement. Community relations issues must be fundamental to the work of the NI Executive and the Assembly, not an optional extra.
- 2.1.7 It is vital that new thinking must permeate all levels of Government and society, rather than remaining a niche. The promotion of better community relations needs a strong champion and leadership at the heart of Government to combat the current low profile and fractured nature of policy-making.
- 2.1.8 It is important that all actors are working to a strong, clear and coherent vision of a shared and integrated society, where people can live and learn, work and play together in safety.
- 2.1.9 Therefore, it is important that the debate moves on swiftly from the policy framework to practical changes in actual policy. In terms of policy action, community relations can no

longer occupy a small niche within public policy, but rather find its rightful place by mainstreaming a concept of practice throughout all Departments and public agencies. Work should then be focused on turning this concept into a living, working reality, at the heart of local politics and the core of daily living.

- 2.1.10 It should be possible to shape policies, practices and institutions to enable trust and good relations to be engendered, and to eliminate sectarianism and other forms of prejudice. However, changes in policy and law are liable to be subverted by fear. Therefore, they need to be backed up by an appropriate security posture.
- 2.1.11 Fundamentally, Alliance believes that there should be a duty on Government Departments and agencies to promote community relations in all aspects of their work, and that all policies should be assessed for their impact on sharing over separation.
- 2.1.12 There are a number of aspects to community relations that this document fails to address. These include: the human and financial costs of segregation; the link between a divided society and identity issues; the link between our community relations problems and the negative signals sent out by the political system; and the interaction between community relations issues and human rights and equality. The document also needs to go into greater detail on the proposed methodology for assessing progress on community relations. ▲ Shared Future also fails to note the way in which Government inadvertently entrenches segregation by catering for separate demands in the way it deploys public expenditures, and similarly fails to realise the cost savings that could be found through the promotion of shared facilities with the proceeds being invested in improved public services.

2.2 Alliance Party policy on integrated education

- 2.2.1 The Alliance Party has a long-standing commitment to the support and expansion of integrated education, based on two party principles: pluralism in a united community and the provision of parental choice in education. Integrated education is an excellent example of actual reconciliation, benefiting children and adults alike. Integrated education has also made a significant contribution to social cohesion in Northern Ireland.
- 2.2.2 ***Alliance Ten-Point Plan on Integrated Education.*** Alliance recommends the adoption of the following ten-point plan to expand the provision of integrated education in Northern Ireland, in line with demand:

(1) Government should set a minimum target of 10% of children being educated in integrated schools by 2010.

It is important that the duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education is turned into practical targets. This target would involve adding another 1% per annum to the levels of children in integrated schools. This 10% target should be subsequently revised upwards.

(2) The duty on the Department of Education to encourage, not merely to facilitate, the development of integrated education should be extended to Education and Library Boards, and the new single Education Authority established under the Review of Public Administration.

At present, Education and Library Boards and their mooted successor body have no responsibilities to develop integrated education. To date, ELBs have been purely reactive with respect to the development of integrated education.

(3) Both the Department and other Education authorities should have a duty to strategically plan for the future provision of integrated education, including identifying where additional provision needs to be situated.

Currently, the development of integrated education is ad hoc. It is in the hands of parents to create new schools, or for individual existing schools to hold ballots on transformation. The development of integrated education is not managed. Consequently, there may be a serious under-provision of the choice of integrated schools in some areas, and potentially an over-provision in others. NICIE could play a central role in strategically planning the expansion of integrated education. Responsible bodies should conduct ‘community audits’ to assess where there are gaps in provision.

(4) Where new schools are being built in Northern Ireland, for example to service new housing developments, there should be a presumption that they shall be integrated.

There is an urgent need to provide more mixed housing in Northern Ireland, in both the public and private sectors. New build housing should be created and maintained as integrated. The schools that service these new housing developments should reflect this basis. Furthermore, given the current financial pressures experienced from running a segregated school system, there are powerful fiscal arguments for creating new schools on an integrated or otherwise shared basis.

(5) Government should encourage the transformation of existing schools to integrated status and review the current procedures to make this easier.

It is unrealistic to expect the necessary growth in the provision of integrated education to come entirely from new build schools. The development of integrated education must take into the account the existing schools estate. However, there are also dangers through the transformed route. To date, only controlled schools have transformed; no Catholic schools have gone down this route. As the viability criteria for transformed schools are more relaxed, with the requirement to show the ability to achieve 10% from the minority tradition in the first year intake and 30% overall inside 10 years, there is a prospect that proportionately more Protestants could end up in integrated schools.

(6) Government should reform and relax the criteria for the creation and maintenance of integrated schools, giving recognition to those children of mixed, other or no religious background.

In one sense, it may be sufficient to argue that all children should have access to education with an integrated ethos. However, the current approach to integrated schools needs viability criteria in order to ensure that schools are sufficiently representative of the community, and that children benefit from being exposed to those from different backgrounds.

At present, both new build and transformed integrated schools have to meet viability criteria first to receive and then to maintain government funding. In essence, this means that the numbers of pupils who are categorised as either ‘Protestant’ or ‘Catholic’ cannot fall below a certain level lest the school becomes ‘unviable’. Those pupils who are categorised as ‘other’ or come from ethnic backgrounds do not really count in this approach.

This system creates a pressure for pupils to be categorised according to the minority religious/communal designation in order to help make the school viable. In essence, the growing proportion of people who may be perceived to be making a positive choice to move away from traditional (divisive) labels are constrained from doing so. This creates a particular problem for those pupils coming from mixed marriages or mixed relationships. The system is contrary to the broader ethos of A Shared Future.

The current approach to viability criteria is becoming particularly antiquated given the large numbers of new immigrants coming to Northern Ireland. Their children do not fit into the

traditional labels, and where there are particular concentrations of such children, the current viability criteria can become particularly absurd.

One immediate solution, rather than trying to prevent the smaller communal/religious background falling below a certain level, would be to impose a percentage threshold over which those from the larger communal/religious background could not pass. This would give space to people to define themselves as they wish without jeopardising the viability of the school.

(7) Government should give formal recognition to the contribution being made to the process of reconciliation by ‘mixed’ schools, those with a mixed enrolment but no formal integrated status.

There are a number of voluntary grammar, state-controlled, and Catholic maintained schools that do have to varying degrees mixed enrolments, and significant numbers of children from different backgrounds to the traditional ethos of the school. While these schools maintain particular ethos and are not formally integrated, they are playing an important role in breaking down barriers and exposing children from different backgrounds to others.

(8) Government should encourage existing schools to share facilities and ultimately campuses.

There is much that can be done to encourage sharing in education, short of the creation of formal integrated schools. Integrated and single-identity schools should not be regarded as separate poles, but rather places on a continuum with a range of other policy options in-between. In some circumstances, there may be powerful financial and economic reasons for existing schools in pooling their physical and other resources, including shared campuses and co-management. In doing so, maximum opportunities should be provided for children to mix and interact with one another, in particular within extracurricular activities.

(9) Government should oppose any creation of any perceived ‘right’ to a guarantee of public funding for segregated schools, as this could forever entrench segregated schools and frustrate the process of integration.

It should be up to the democratically-elected legislators to determine the nature of the education system in any society. The current system in Northern Ireland has developed due to a number of historical factors; however, this is hard and fast rule that dictates that a divided society needs to have separate schools for different sections of the community. European and international human rights norms with respect to divided societies and rights of minorities, only imposes duties upon states to reflect diversity within the education system. This can be delivered either through providing for religious education, teaching diversity through a single school system or the provision of separate schools. The long-term future of Northern Ireland’s education system should be placed in the hands of the Assembly. It would be wrong to constrain this choice through protecting the current system within a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights, as has already been suggested by some, far beyond what is required under current human rights norms.

(10) Government should advocate the de-segregation of teacher training courses and facilities, and the familiarisation of integrated education policies and practices in such institutions.

Education is the only field in Northern Ireland where professionals are trained separately from one another. Even where teachers work in a segregated school system, there is no underlying rationale as to why they should be trained separately.

3 ALLIANCE RESPONSE

3.1 Specific concerns

3.1.1 In light of developments in Northern Ireland education and community relations policy, Alliance wants the Bain Review to address some specific concerns:

- **Reducing the financial overspend and surplus capacity**
- **Ensure a genuine right of parental choice**
- **Meet good relations objectives as set out in *A Shared Future***

3.2 Reducing the financial overspend

3.2.1 Inefficiencies, resulting from societal segregation, are a feature of Northern Ireland's education system. These have interacted with a system that was already defined by a high degree of fragmentation, due to the sectoral nature of Northern Irish education (there are several distinct school sectors: controlled; maintained; selective; non-elective; integrated; Irish-medium).

3.2.2 The result has been to produce a network of school authorities more diverse than anywhere else in the UK. In addition to the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI), there are:

- 5 geographically based Education and Library Boards (ELBs);
- a Commission for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS);
- the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE);
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (Irish-medium schools);
- and the non-statutory Governing Bodies Association of Northern Ireland (GBA)

3.2.3 One report referred to the “complete and unbroken separateness” of the two existing school systems that existed from 1922 until very recently. The result has been to effectively enshrine the existence of two parallel education systems: on the one hand, a system of “controlled” schools owned and run by public authorities and attended predominantly by Protestants; and on the other, a large voluntary sector owned and governed jointly by the Catholic Church and public representatives and funded by the state.

3.2.4 Thus, public expenditure on education has had to provide for a religiously-segregated school system that is the site of various inefficiencies.

3.2.5 There are more schools in Northern Ireland towns than in mainland UK towns of comparative size. The following tables show the distribution of school sizes across the Northern Irish education system:

Northern Ireland Schools Size (2002-3)

| Pupils | Primary Schools | Post-Primary Non-Grammar Schools | Post-Primary Grammar Schools |
|---------------|------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| 0-30 | 38 | | |
| 31-60 | 137 | | |
| 61-100 | 177 | 1 | 0 |
| 101-200 | 266 | 12 | 0 |
| 201-300 | 124 | 19 | 0 |
| 301-400 | 85 | 21 | 0 |
| 401-500 | 43 | 26 | 7 |
| 501-600 | 26 | 24 | 3 |
| 601-700 | 15 | 17 | 5 |
| 701-800 | 3 | 12 | 14 |
| 801-900 | 0 | 10 | 14 |
| 901-1000 | 2 | 10 | 9 |
| >1000 | 1 | 12 | 19 |
| Totals | 917 | 164 | 71 |

- 3.2.6 In primary education, 'small schools' (those with 60 pupils or less) account for 175 out of a total of 917 schools. Thus, 19% of Northern Ireland's Primary schools can be deemed 'small'. By comparison, the number of primary schools considered 'small' across the entire UK is 2,712 out of 22,800 (state-funded) or 12%. There is a significantly higher proportion of 'small schools' in Northern Ireland than across the UK as a whole.
- 3.2.7 In post-primary education (taking into account both the grammar and non-grammar sectors), 'small schools' (those with 300 pupils or less) account for 32 out of 235 schools, or 14%. This percentage is higher if only the non-grammar post-primary school sector is examined. In this case, 'small schools' account for 20% of non-grammar post-primary provision.
- 3.2.8 One consequence of the relatively high percentage of 'small schools' is the additional burden in terms of capital costs on the education budget. Capital costs account for 5.3% of public expenditure on education in Northern Ireland, compared to 3.5%, 3.9% and 3.4% for England, Wales and Scotland respectively.
- 3.2.9 Also, the existence of small schools contributes to the problem of surplus places:

Northern Ireland Surplus Places (2001)

| ELB Area | Primary Schools | Post-Primary Schools |
|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| BELB | 7,243 | 2,731 |
| NEELB | 5,656 | 3,674 |
| SEELB | 5,797 | 2,190 |
| SELB | 3,650 | 2,860 |
| WELB | 4,924 | 2,23 |
| Totals | 27,270 | 13,478 |

- 3.2.10 In total, then, there were just over 40,000 surplus places in Northern Ireland's education system in 2001.
- 3.2.11 It should be born in mind that it is not considered reasonable to assume that pupil places in different types of school are interchangeable. This derives from the fact that the Department of Education has a statutory duty to ensure that insofar as possible, pupils are educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents (Article 44 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order, 1986). This is expressed in a plurality of structures and it is inevitable that many areas will be served by more than one school.
- 3.2.12 Moreover, the existence of a generally declining birth rate in Northern Ireland has led to a steady decrease in the school-age population over a number of years.
- 3.2.13 Nevertheless, the problem of surplus places appears to be a particularly pressing one for Northern Ireland. This is particularly so, when it is considered that the number of surplus places appears to have increased in the last decade. In 1992, it was estimated that the number of surplus places stood at 35,000. Given the above figures, it would seem that there has been an increase of around 14%
- 3.2.14 The relative size of the surplus population in Northern Ireland can be gauged when it is measured against the total number of pupils in education there were 169,328 pupils in primary education and 155,503 in post-primary education.
- 3.2.15 Thus, in Northern Ireland, surplus places accounted for 14% of the total available places in state-funded primary education. By contrast, surplus places accounted for 8% of the total available places in state-funded post-primary education.
- 3.2.16 To some degree, then, these significantly high levels of surplus places must be a consequence of Northern Ireland's divided society.
- 3.2.17 This in turn undoubtedly contributes to the fact that despite spending more on education (as a proportion of public expenditure), less money reaches the individual pupil in the classroom, as compared to schools in England and Wales.
- 3.2.18 In 1995, education spending in Northern Ireland amounted to around 10% of GDP, as compared to 5% in the rest of the UK. This equates to an excess £65 million-plus spent annually, for Northern Ireland's inefficient and segregated education system. (1995 NI GDP: £13.175bn; UK GDP: £1,140bn.)
- 3.2.19 In Northern Ireland 14.5% less was spent per pupil in primary schools as compared to England and Wales. Similarly, 2.5% less was spent per pupil in secondary schools. In real terms in 2001/2 £2,863.70 was spent per pupil in Northern Ireland.

3.3 Genuine parental choice

- 3.3.1 The provision of parental choice in education has inevitably resulted in excess capacity.
- 3.3.2 However, the option of integrated schools has been inadequately provided for, with recurring oversubscription. NICIE reports that since 1999, integrated schools have declined admission to 5,772 children, due to insufficient places.
- 3.3.3 Additionally, there are numerous examples whereby Departmental funding has been denied to establish or develop an integrated school, on the grounds that to do so may jeopardise the viability of existing school provision. Such action betrays the principle of parental choice as well as the tenet of neutral public policy.
- 3.3.4 Indeed, this is no less than taking a position of maintaining segregation as a matter of public policy. This fails to implement *A Shared Future*, and is counter to DE's duty under the 1989 Education Reform Order "to encourage and facilitate" integrated education. This position also runs counter to the Government's declared intent when it established the national school system in the 1830s.

3.4 Good relations objectives

- 3.4.1 Alliance supports the principles behind *A Shared Future* policy objective and statements:
- "It is essential that the challenges of diversity and tolerance are consciously integrated into the development curriculum of each child in all sectors." (¶2.4.7)
- "[The] cross-curricular theme of local and global citizenship has the potential to make a significant contribution to understanding the causes of conflict between and within communities both in Northern Ireland and elsewhere." (¶2.4.8)
- That many pupils had gained mutual trust through in Education for Mutual Understanding schemes and Schools Community Relations Programmes. (¶2.4.10)
- That the 'Promoting and Managing Diversity in Tertiary Education Advisory Group' aimed to bring together agencies, individuals and colleges to promote good practice and community relations. (¶2.4.13)
- 3.4.2 Proposed actions outlined within *A Shared Future* included encouraging and facilitating integrated education and greater integration in education.
- 3.4.3 However, Alliance is concerned about approach of the strategic review of education in terms of how 'strategic planning of the schools estate' can best encourage and support cross-sector collaboration. The approach of cross-sector collaboration, through rationalisation of individual sectors, may simply result in a more efficient while still deeply segregated education system in Northern Ireland.
- 3.4.4 Instead, Alliance draws attention to the *First Triennial Action Plan (2006-9)* for *A Shared Future*, which refers to 'options for collaboration/sharing on a cross-community basis'. Cross-sector collaboration is only one option; sharing within a singular school environment is another option.
- 3.4.5 Indeed, the experience of the integrated school sector demonstrates how it serves as an ideal model for proposed education reform in Northern Ireland.
- 3.4.6 Alliance argues that formally integrated and jointly managed (inter-denominational) schools are the only models that can deliver cross-sector collaboration and cross-community sharing, reduce surplus places, reduce the school estate, and protect local education provision.
- 3.4.7 These goals can only be achieved if there is meaningful parental choice in Northern Ireland's education system. This will require the Department of Education to introduce 'community

audits' to allow parents to make an informed choice, and whenever a choice has been made for integrated or joint managed schools, for authorities to make adequate provision.

- 3.4.8 Alliance favours the merits of integrated education in addressing societal divisions in Northern Ireland, while respecting parental choice. Alliance is not arguing for any forced integration. Rather, we continue to campaign for the sufficient provision for those who do wish to have their children educated in a cross-community environment, so parents do not have to send their children to segregated schools, against their will.