

Dear Mr Marks

I'm sorry I thought this Submission had been sent earlier this week.

If invited to address the Committee, I should like to read this address to its members.

Apologies

Paddy McEvoy

Submission on Shared Education:

Stormont Address at launch of Humanist Manifesto 22 Oct 2015

I am honoured to be asked to say a few words in support of this truly important document.

It is stated in the opening paragraph that Humanists believe in the worth and integrity of the human person. We believe that people, particularly the young, should be free from indoctrination. For that reason, we oppose faith schools, and are particularly opposed to the setting up of new faith schools. We call for the introduction of a modern curriculum which embraces 'Religion, Philosophy and Ethics', for all children.

Humanism was described recently by a theologian from the University of Limerick as 'a sub-cultural secularist elite'. We would like to point out to such commentators that the ideas contained in this Manifesto are anything but 'sub-cultural' ideas. These ideas are very much mainstream, as was demonstrated by the outcome of the Same Sex Referendum in the Republic last May 2015.

Northern Ireland has for far too long been known as A Tale of Two Ghettos. The Education section of this Manifesto contains suggestions that have the backing of large majorities of the people, yet trying to get them implemented is a slow business. We in the Humanist Association are committed to the creation of an education service that will ensure that children of all backgrounds are educated together. (We also would like to say that it is high time we eliminated illiteracy. This is a scandal which has gone on too long.)

We reject the Shared Education proposals as envisaged by the NI Executive. Why? Because the word 'shared' has been misappropriated.

I have taught in schools I have considered to be 'shared' schools, in both England and Northern Ireland. In these schools, the pupils shared: desks; resources; classrooms; lessons; teachers; corridors; play areas. They played the same sports, in the same teams. They played in the same orchestras, bands and groups. They sang in the same choirs. They acted in the same plays, sharing the same stages. They shared the same premises, all parts of them. But most of all they shared TIME. Those 14, critical, formative years from 4 to 18 afforded them time to get to know each other, properly, not for *what* they were, but for *who* they were. The schools I am describing are true, comprehensive, INTEGRATED schools.

The 'Shared Education' proposal is an unconvincing expedient, designed to keep the 'key stakeholders' happy, designed to preserve their much vaunted 'ethos'. The proposal is well short of what Northern Ireland needs. It is unconvincing because it is the educational equivalent of ships passing in the night. The concept of Shared Education is a philosophically flawed expedient, because it is based on 'non-communal', partitioned premises. It is heading us off in another wrong direction. Because of the transient, superficial contacts

that will ensue if this policy is implemented, they cannot provide the pupil with the time which is required for real friendships to form. Even casual relationships take time to develop. These will not be possible in tangential settings which deprive children of the opportunity of spending their precious, formative years together.

The 'Shared Education' proposal reminds me of those statues where hands are outstretched but, tantalisingly, don't actually meet. Shared Education is a bridge, the centre of which has yet to be completed – you can only go so far on them. You can never pass over to the other side - and make return journeys.

The tragedy of education in Northern Ireland is that it *was* possible to have an integrated education service, a century ago, in the 1920s, but such a visionary initiative was blocked by certain, powerful 'key stakeholders', who opted to circle the wagons, rather than look to the well-being of society as a whole, whilst claiming all the while, disingenuously, to have society's well-being at heart. It is now nearly the 2020s and key stakeholders are still blocking progress. If the key stakeholders are not confronted now, by principled politicians and others, we could well be trapped, a century hence, in much the same *cul-de-sac* in the 2120s.

I make a modest proposal to these 'key stakeholders': take a firm hold of said stake and drive it through the heart of the parochial, sectarian, segregated education system you have imposed on us, which has caused so much division, which a majority of people, from all backgrounds in N Ireland want to see phased out, and if truth be told is flat-lining in terms of 'delivering' the vaunted ethos of times past. And as far as the 'key' part of 'key-stakeholder' is concerned, I appeal to them to use that key to unlock the ghettos you have been party to creating, and free people to escape the circumscribed lives they have been living. Such a development would truly liberate the talents and

genius of not only the young, but of society in general. People crave an end to so-called Peace Walls and all the other trappings of sectarianism. The people crave to live in a post-sectarian society.

I also appeal to all interested parties, to parents, to voters, to teachers, to wake politicians up and get them to smell the reek coming from our respective stables. And to clean those stables out, for once and for all. The need to integrate Teacher Training, immediately, is hardly arguable in this divided society.

This will require big-heartedness. It will call for magnanimity. For generous thinking. Are such leaders there?

Paddy McEvoy

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