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Select Committee Questions Media Reporting of Church Schools' Admissions Criteria

During the last session of the House of Commons Education Select Committee, which took place on Wednesday 2nd February, the Committee had the opportunity to question Dr Ian Craig, head of the Office of the Schools Adjudicator, on the OSA's most recent annual report.

The report attracted widespread media coverage and Dr Craig was quoted as criticising some faith criteria in admissions as discriminatory to immigrants and skewed in favour of the "white middle class".

Damian began his questioning of Dr Craig by noting that there was actually very little mention of faith schools in the report and the press attention and Dr Craig's reported comments on faith schools seemed out of proportion.

The full uncorrected transcript of the discussion between Damian and Dr Craig is below.

Q13 Damian Hinds: Dr Craig, I want to talk about faith schools. To be clear, 97% of such schools are either Anglican or Catholic—with more C of E at primary level and more Catholic at secondary level. There is a feeling among some commentators that those schools exist as a way for parents to get their children into a selective school by the back door. That feeling is heightened by press headlines such as, "Faith schools 'biased towards middle-classes'", "Faith schools 'skewing admissions rules'", and "Faith school admissions 'unfair to immigrants'". You will recognise those headlines from the *Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Guardian* immediately after the publication of your report. In your report itself, there is very little mention of faith schools.

Dr Craig: Correct.

Q14 Damian Hinds: But somehow, between then and the press stories coming out via the press conference, the story had become one about bell ringing. You are reported in those articles as saying, "You might have in a middle class area a lot of women who aren't going to work who might be able to go in and clean the church... It may well be in a more working class area there isn't that ability. We've come across some issues where that sort of thing, we feel, benefits the white middle-class area and doesn't necessarily benefit some of the immigrant children that might live in the community." Now, some time after the event, do you regret either having said that, or that your comments were reported in that way?

Dr Craig: I regret the way they were reported. That comment, which I believe I did make—I cannot remember my exact words, but I am sure I used words like that—was part of a discussion that was taking place in a room full of people. I raised an issue about what I

sometimes consider to be inappropriate admissions criteria and points systems. I refused to give an example; an example came from the floor from a reporter who said, "I have an example of a school that gave additional points for bell ringing." I said, "Well, I have not come across that, but if I did come across it, I would probably think that it was inappropriate." We then got into the discussion from where those comments arose.

Q15 Damian Hinds: But you did talk about volunteer church cleaners. I don't know how many volunteer church cleaners you know, but of those you do, how would you describe their demographic profile?

Dr Craig: I don't know many of them at all.

Q16 Damian Hinds: And how on earth did you conclude that recognition in a school points system for people who clean churches, for example, discriminates against non-white people?

Dr Craig: That was part of the debate—only partly reported in the press—about how some activities that were scored by some schools in points systems could be used and might differentiate between different groups of people, sometimes in favour of—to use the term—working class people, and sometimes in favour of middle class people. It may have been a bad example.

Q17 Damian Hinds: In terms of ethnicity, are you familiar with the ethnic composition of, say, the Catholic population of this country versus the average population?

Dr Craig: Generally, I think yes.

Q18 Damian Hinds: Are you aware that Catholic secondary schools heavily over-index on, for example, black children and other non-British white children?

Dr Craig: Indeed. In many areas, yes.

Q19 Damian Hinds: Would you say that it is true that—as your comments seem to suggest—children from Catholic families, for example, are more likely to be middle class and wealthy, or would you say that the opposite is true?

Dr Craig: Obviously, it varies from one area to another.

Q20 Damian Hinds: Given that journalists were obviously going to pick up on faith schools because they always do so when it comes to schools admissions, on reflection, and if you had been writing the press reports, what would have been a more representative headline to describe the faith schools situation today?

Dr Craig: It would be something about how, for some faith schools—I was not labelling all of them—we have evidence that they have inappropriate points systems in place that are not necessarily objective, which could relate to some sections of the community rather than others. I would not have used the terms middle class or working class, and I certainly would not have used eastern European.

Q21 Damian Hinds: Thank you. In the report itself, you say, “Issues have arisen again this year involving Voluntary Aided schools and diocesan authorities”—that is my own emphasis—“using faith criteria and associated points systems that fall outside” the allowable definitions of the code. Specifically speaking of diocesan authorities, can you give some examples of that? Can you suggest who would be better qualified than a diocesan authority to establish what constitutes religious practice and observance?

Dr Craig: If I can give you one example, it is date of baptism. In this country, it is fairly common for some diocesan authorities, and certainly some Roman Catholic schools, to give additional points, where they have a points system, for baptism within the first three or six months. In some communities that is not the case. The point that I made at the press conference, which was not picked up on, was that this could be discriminatory. We have come across that in one particular school, where we had that discussion with the school and the diocesan authority, and they changed their points system to pull it into line.

Q22 Damian Hinds: Overall, who do you think is better placed to understand the religious practices and observances of countries other than this one within their own faith? Would you say that it was diocesan authorities, or the Office of the Schools Adjudicator?

Dr Craig: I think it’s a combination. I respect the diocesan authorities very highly—I think the faith authorities are doing a very good job in education at the moment—but at times, I think they need to be reminded of some other parts of the code and of regulations and legislation, which may need to be considered when they are putting their thoughts in process.

Q23 Damian Hinds: Obviously, denominational schools are often going to be heavily over-subscribed. Faith schools in general have CVA scores of around 1005. The standard is 1000, of course, and the average is 1000.9. Catholic schools are higher again at 1006.6. There will always be a lot of people trying to get into them. How do you think denominational schools should apply over-subscription criteria?

Dr Craig: Basically, objectively and relating, as legislation says, to membership and practice of the faith or denomination. It is how that is interpreted that is the issue. I have an issue that I want to tease out. I will use a different example from the one that you gave me, which is of a points system in a faith school that says that additional points will be given for “charitable works”, with no definition of what charitable works means and no discussion on paper of how many points different charitable works will carry.

A different points system—this was for a Roman Catholic school—gave points for being “at the heart” of the church, being “attached to” the church or being “known to” the church. What the code and regulations say is that any points system, if employed, must be objective, and parents must be able to ascertain how easy it is for them to meet whatever criteria they need to meet. I would say that if you are not giving objective measures of being at the heart of the church, being attached to the church or being known to the church, that is not necessarily objective and it is not necessarily giving parents a real view of how accessible that school is to them.

Q24 Damian Hinds: Do you accept that if you talk about a denominational school, which is often attached to a church—they are in a sense, at the heart of the church—you are not necessarily looking for parents to change their behaviour in order for their children to go to the school? In fact, I would have thought that is perhaps exactly what they do not want. They are trying to identify children who specifically have not had parents who have changed their behaviour and tried to bend the rules, but actually are C of E, Catholic, or whatever and are

practising in that faith and are part of the Church overall, as well as the physical church that is near the school. Presumably, it is one of the things that is rather difficult to codify and have a tick-box system, as though, if you do this, you are more attached to the church than not. Anybody who is in that church—a priest, a vicar, a teacher or a head teacher—will know it when they see it.

Dr Craig: It's not objective, is it? The code and regulation very clearly say that the criteria, if you're using the system, have to be objective. Remember that it comes back to membership and practice of the faith or denomination—nothing outside of that.

Q25 Damian Hinds: I'm almost done, Chair. Of all the cases processed by your office last year, what percentage was solely or primarily to do with faith criteria for admissions?

Dr Craig: Forty-five out of the 151 determinations on admissions related to own-admission faith schools.

Q26 Damian Hinds: So that's about 65% to 70%.

Dr Craig: Yes. I can break that down a bit more. Of those, 23 were related to information on supplementary information forms, for example, so that is very clearly relating to faith schools and faith criteria; and 12 of that 45 were related to clarity and complexity of the criteria.

Q27 Damian Hinds: So that's 12 or 23 out of 6,753 religious schools in this country.

Dr Craig: Yes.

Q28 Damian Hinds: Can I make a request, as my final question, that in next year's report, given the publicity that was attached to this year's report, the office makes strenuous additional efforts to put into context the extent of this problem, and the extent to which there is not a problem in clearly the vast majority of cases?

Dr Craig: I'm very happy to take that on board. Indeed, I have already written a note to myself before today. When the newspapers came out after the press conference, I wrote a note to myself to say that that is what I have to do next year.

Damian Hinds: Thank you very much.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

Damian Hinds was elected MP for East Hampshire in May 2010. He was subsequently elected to serve on the Education Select Committee in the first ever round of elections for committee seats.

The full [uncorrected](#) transcript of the session is attached by email.

For further information please contact:

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