

Don't blame faith schools for our segregated society



A new think-that report on faith schools ignores the impact of mass immigration on Britain

Are faith schools partly to blame for social and religious segregation? A new report by the think-tank, the Social Integration Foundation, seems to suggest so.

As the Telegraph reported:

No new faith schools should be allowed unless groups planning them can prove pupils will mix with children from other backgrounds in an effort to combat the threat of extremism and social division, an inquiry into integration in the UK has recommended.

The final report of the Social Integration Commission, said that the small number of Muslim schools had had 'particular difficulties' ensuring their students have contact with people from other walks of life.

Britain's education system is increasingly 'segregated' along social, religious and racial lines, the inquiry, chaired by Tony Blair's former Downing Street policy chief Matthew Taylor, concluded.

Matthew Taylor was also director of the IPPR, the most pro-immigration of think-tanks, and one cited

by Labour in its arguments to vastly increase it; while Taylor was in charge immigration minister Barbara Roche used the IPPR to make the case for liberalising controls. I've debated the subject with him on the Moral Maze before.

Yet strangely this report, which cites "faith schools" six times in the context of segregation, does not mention immigration at all, and "immigrant" once, only in the context of victims of increased xenophobia.

It seems strange to support a policy in which the previous government allowed in 3.6 million immigrants, a huge, unprecedented figure, and to then point to faith schools for the subsequent (and some would say, inevitable) segregation that followed.

As I wrote a while back, Labour's immigration policy was always going to lead to more religious separation, especially among Muslims, and this in turn would lead to efforts to shut down church schools:

Discomfort with religion has led to increasing calls for greater French-style laicite, in particular in the area of faith schools, but while this is often framed in terms of opposition to all religious conservatism, countering Muslim separatism is clearly the most urgent motive. Writing in *The Independent*, Christina Patterson suggested that 'a properly civilised society would accept that while lovely little C of E schools were once an excellent place for children to learn about the religion that shaped their culture, art and laws, you can't have them without having the madrassa run by the mad mullah next door, and therefore, sadly, you can't have either'. Church schools are a good thing, but diversity requires state-enforced uniformity. A Catholic or Anglican might ask why they should have to sacrifice their schools, among the most successful in the country, because of another religion – this was not part of the terms and conditions of mass immigration.

Already Christian charities have suffered, as the proliferation of radical Islam has meant the authorities having to redefine their traditionally relaxed relationship with the various Christian institutions that are woven into the social fabric, further raising the transaction costs within society. It had always been assumed that religious organisations working in advancing religion, education and the relief of poverty were acting 'charitably', that is for the public benefit. This presumption had evolved over centuries, and had been protected and regulated (lightly) through Parliament. The regulation was light because Parliament had a long and extensive relationship with Christian institutions.

In response to the growth of religious charities with which Parliament did not have an extensive relationship, the Charities Act 2006 removed from the various local and national institutions of the Church of England (and other Christian churches) the presumption of acting charitably, meaning that all 13,000 Parochial Church Councils, many of the Finance Committees of the 43 Anglican Dioceses, the Archbishops' Council, the Church Commissioners and the countless number of charitable organisations in whole or in part related to the Church must now satisfy the Charity Commission that they are of public benefit. To cope with all this extra work the Charity Commission established a Faith and Social Cohesion Unit.

Liberalism, in its traditional sense, is a product of fairly homogenous societies where the state can afford to leave communities, schools and individuals to their own affairs; once you import large numbers of people from vastly different cultures then it becomes necessary for the state to intervene – which is great for people in government, but a pain for everyone else.

What's more, there's not much to suggest that eliminating faith schools would make much difference, since school segregation simply reflects neighbourhood segregation, and when it comes to diversity most of us vote with our feet.

As the report says: “The recent drive to open free schools has led to increased numbers of children being educated in peer groups dominated by a single faith group or community. The small number of Muslim faith schools in the UK are experiencing particular difficulties in ensuring their pupils are able to meet and mix with children from different backgrounds.”

That is because, allowed freedom, most people will generally meet and mix with people of the same backgrounds – “people like us”, or PLU in the common parlance. This is not necessary religious or racial, it can be cultural and is almost always to some degree about class and education levels, but it's a fact of life, and becomes sharpened when the people unlike us are very unlike us.

The only way to counter this is to force people to mix with people unlike them, or to “encourage” them. So among the report's recommendations:

“All schools should seek to include opportunities within their religious studies programmes for pupils to mix with and study religious practices and ethical questions alongside children of different faiths and backgrounds.

“Faith schools could, however, partner with a school rooted in a different religious culture to provide interfaith workshops.

“Schools in remote and ethnically or religiously homogenous geographical areas should make use of the internet to connect with schools with different faith or socio-economic profiles.”

I’m not sure the internet is necessarily a good idea in this case.

Likewise: “Facilitating social integration should be considered even more of an imperative for these institutions than for state schools. The Commission urges all private schools to take material steps to promote social mixing between children from different income backgrounds – offering more places to pupils from less affluent backgrounds, sharing resources and facilities to a much greater extent and entering into partnerships including Teaching School alliances (wherein outstanding schools work with others to provide high-quality training and development to new and experienced school staff).

“Whilst practices vary from business to business, staff conducting interviews under CV-blind conditions might not be given any information regarding the schools and universities attended by candidates, or may be asked to compile shortlists of applicants without knowledge of their names or addresses.”

And then, it argues, “schools’ intakes should reflect the economic and ethnic diversity of their communities”. What do they mean by “should”? That the state will enforce this diversity if we do not embrace it out of choice?

However, and as the report points out elsewhere, school segregation also reflects neighbourhood segregation. Schools in many towns in England are segregated because the towns are segregated. I wonder if they would approve of bussing, which is universally regarded as a failure in the United States where it was tried, largely because people simply moved to areas where they could have their children educated with PLU. In my experience people will go to great lengths to avoid living the sort of lives theoreticians of society think they should live rather than the ones they’d like to live.

Religion is curious because in the context of diversity it's both a pro and anti-integrationist force. In my own experience, going to a Catholic school ensured I mixed with people from a wide array of races, cultures and social classes, although how much young people actually learn from other cultures is open to question (teenagers are very conformist culturally, as they are on most matters). Had a good London Catholic state school not been available my parents would have either found the money to go private or moved further out, both of which options would have meant my being educated with people more like me ie. white, middle-class and British. But then I still grew up in a city where sectarianism had faded after centuries of effort, and Catholicism or Protestantism meant little to people's identities, if anything; unfortunately, thanks in part to the Labour Government of 1997-2010, religious conflict has returned to this country with a vengeance.

The most telling section of this report comes when it suggests that "in order to reconcile the rise of free schools with a commitment to social integration, the government should seriously consider emulating the Shared Education programme instituted by the Northern Irish Executive".

Diversity has been such a success in England that we're now looking to Northern Ireland as a model of how to deal with it. I think that, inadvertently, says a lot about the situation.

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