

SUBMISSION OF ISLE OF MAN FREETHINKERS
IN RESPONSE TO THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION
DOCUMENT ON A DRAFT EDUCATION
(MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL

Submitted by Stuart Hartill as Secretary, Isle of Man Freethinkers

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Introductory Remarks

We must begin by noting that this consultation yet again comes after undemocratic decisions to change have already been taken behind closed doors.

As we pointed out in our response to a government consultation on this very subject last year, the main problem with such 'public consultations' is that they come at the end of a process in which impending legislation has been decided well in advance by private negotiations of which the public are unaware, and from which most groups who could usefully contribute have been barred. This makes them rubber stamping exercises, not open and democratic government.

We will restrict our comments to two of the proposals made in the Bill, as these are enough to demonstrate the inadequacy of the whole project.

Board Membership and Anti-Democratic Government Practice

Firstly we note with some dismay the replacement of a process of nominally democratic elected Education Board membership with the introduction of a tame Panel of Governors. This effectively slams the last door shut against parents who wish to take an active interest in their children's education, and concludes a process whereby the Department of Education can avoid all public accountability.

The change was not surprising when we follow the general pattern of recent years, for example the continued privileging of Christian reactionaries in the 'new, improved' Religious Education Advisory Committee (still chaired by a clergyman chosen by another government, still closed to non-Christians) and the decision to no longer make minutes of Education Board meetings available through outlets such as Tynwald Library or to the press. In particular, the bizarre recent decision of the Department to let religious groups with creationist views and an ugly record of homophobia and other prejudices use schools for Sunday 'worship' causes us to worry if the education of our children is in safe hands.

The system of elected Board membership was certainly imperfect, in that it favoured non-working parents with the leisure time to devote to inconveniently timed meetings and little or no practical experience of the difficulties faced by the majority. For that reason, it was commonly and quite fairly regarded as a farce staged by and for a privileged private club in which most of the public refused to play cameo roles.

Nevertheless, it was at least a nominally democratic body through which determined individuals might force some small changes. When the most vital role of such Members was to protect the public against the insular tendencies of the Education Department we cannot have confidence in 'Governors' selected by that Department. Indeed, the very fact that an individual is thought suitable for selection by the Education Department suggests that individual's unsuitability to frustrated parents dealing with the fall-out of past and present education policies.

In our experience, any alleged apathy of the public about Manx education can be traced directly back to the failings of the Education Department in quite basic matters which would not be tolerated by customers of a corner shop. It would be interesting to see any evidence upon which the Education Minister judges that parents are failing in their duties or apathetic about education, given the apparent inability of staff in some schools to answer a phone.

Communication between schools and parents is irritatingly one-sided. Those of us who work are frustrated by the lack of adequate school secretarial staff to answer queries which arise - for example from vaguely worded notes home. We find it impossible to get messages to or responses from head teachers who only seem to have time to speak to a few wealthy, underemployed parents. Phones are not answered, or phone messages not passed on, while simple information requests in writing are ignored or forgotten. In our experience covert racism and toytown parochialism are all too common factors in this apathy.

Educational Apartheid and Punishing the Victims

To move to the second area upon which we want to offer comment, in the light of this experience it is arrogant of the Department to seek legal remedies to punish those who lack private resources to fill the gaps in public education. Issuing ever larger fines to parents who fail to send their children to school is simply looking at the problem through the wrong end of the telescope.

The first thing to establish is why the problem arises. The Education Department, we say, have not done this, because if they made any serious attempt to ask parents then like us they would know just how little faith parents from disadvantaged groups have in our education system, having been failed by it themselves.

It seems perfectly reasonable if socially and economically disadvantaged parents in particular now decide that as the government obviously doesn't want to educate our new underclass they should simply stop forcing their children to cooperate in their subsequent branding as 'failures'. It needs to be asked if those parents not frogmarching their children through school gates also did poorly at the same schools, and if so, why.

From the common complaints of our neighbours and workmates we suspect that the answers would reveal a general level of dissatisfaction going back several generations amongst a sector of the population who, especially since the arrival of the finance sector and the property boom of the 1980's, are now effectively disenfranchised.

At school they watched those from favoured families get the exclusive attention of teachers and the hot-housing to prepare them for university, while they were sidelined and, if resistant, marked as 'disruptive' in addition to 'failures'. Now they watch as the same story is repeated, and as their children get branded from reception class onwards by the 'failure' of their parents.

The judgement may be hidden by new age twaddle instead of old school prejudices such as class, sectarianism and anti-semitism, but it is quite definitely made. Far from affecting only a tiny minority, we suspect this is the case for a significant percentage of Manx society.

Emphatic proof that such failure is recognised further afield can be seen in the decision of the UK Ministry of Defence to target island schools as recruiting grounds. The Education Minister is on recent record as saying that the reasons for this are 'different' to the targeting of low academic achievers in areas of poor employment and social deprivation in the UK.

The Department surely realises that the MOD took their decision upon study of reliable information, and that such information emanates from the island. As 'joined up government' is another empty mantra much chanted by the current administration, perhaps the Education Department might start by asking the Department of Home Affairs and the Department of Health and Social Services what information on local crime and social trends is being shared with which off-island agencies, and for what reasons. If they can get an honest answer – or any answer, we suspect it will not be flattering.

In effect, the MOD have been told by a Manx government department (or departments) that the island is a ready source of young people with low esteem and minimal job prospects, capable of performing routine machine tasks if constantly supervised, but without the independence of mind to question why. Most teachers would be insulted to learn that their employer has such a low opinion of their work, which is why the MOD are not targeting or not welcomed by most UK education authorities.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we must ask that the Education Department (and indeed government in general) starts taking civic responsibility seriously, instead of repeatedly kicking the victims of past and present government policy. The Department should have the courage to come out from behind closed doors and face the public. It needs a major attitude change beginning with a determined and rigorous process of self-analysis if it is not to continue failing a significant percentage of children and young people. Until it begins to talk to parents that process will not even begin, and the latest cosmetic changes stand revealed as further desperate attempts to blame the victims.