



IRELAND

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REORGANISATION OF SECONDARY EDUCATION (CONSULTATIVE DOCUMENT)

STATEMENT BY MINISTER OF STATE, MR ROLAND MOYLE, MP, AT A PRESS CONFERENCE
ON JULY 27, 1976

The Consultative Document which has been published today is the product of many months of careful preparation and detailed study. Nevertheless, it is not a blueprint for the introduction of a comprehensive system of secondary schooling in Northern Ireland, but rather a consideration of the shoals to be navigated before a fully comprehensive system could be established and of ways and means which might be of use and of value in the attainment of this objective. It is, in fact, a Consultative Document intended to provide the public with full information on the issues that are involved and with wide opportunity to express its opinions and views, and, in addition, intended also to provide a framework for discussion and consultation with all the bodies and organisations most closely concerned.

The first consideration in the introduction of a comprehensive system in Northern Ireland is the large number of small schools. A comprehensive school must cater for pupils of all levels of ability, and must, therefore, provide a much wider range of subjects and a greater variety of levels of study than do either the grammar, or the normal intermediate, schools. It is not possible to provide this range of subjects and these levels of study in small schools, and in the Burges Report the minimum size of school capable of making adequate provision in the full secondary age range 11+ to 18+ was estimated to be about 900-1,000 pupils. But there are very few schools of this size in Northern Ireland. Part II of the Consultative Document deals in detail with this major difficulty, and I believe that a solution can be found on the lines it indicates - that is by groupings of smaller schools and by concentration of provision for the age range 16+ to 18+ in specified schools or, in some cases, in sixth form colleges. To show how this could be done, and to estimate the

likely cost, Part II of the Consultative Document suggests a role for each individual secondary school in Northern Ireland. But this is merely by way of illustration, and as proof that the difficulty inherent in Northern Ireland's multiplicity of small schools can, in fact, be overcome. It would be for each Education and Library Board eventually in consultation with the management authorities of voluntary schools to consider the most suitable role for every school in its administrative area. At present the suggested reorganisation has not been discussed with Area Education and Library Boards let alone agreed with them.

A second consideration arises from the dependence of the Northern Ireland system on voluntary schools which, in fact, provide more than half the pupil places at secondary level. It is my firm belief, however, that the proposals on management and finance of voluntary schools which are in Part III of the Consultative Document provide bases for discussion and further consideration from which progress can develop. The Government has no wish whatsoever to encroach on the existing powers of the management authorities of voluntary schools. It recognises the magnificent contribution which these schools have made to education in Northern Ireland and looks forward to their full participation in the Northern Ireland secondary system however it may come to be reorganised.

There is a large number of other matters on which there must also be consultation and discussion. The role of the teachers is of supreme importance and full consideration must be given not only to their salary rights and retention of employment but also to retraining and redeployment of teaching staff where this should prove to be necessary. I doubt very much whether teachers will be under pressure even in individual cases but whenever there is reorganisation in the public sector it is a worthy and well established tradition to provide protection for the individual even though there is little practical necessity. The future of preparatory departments and the future of boarding departments are two other matters requiring consultation and consideration. Pupil transport in a possible new system may also present new problems and this too will require special consideration.

In the present system there are two methods of transfer at age 11+, one for pupils who gain admission to grammar schools as holders of Board scholarships or as fee payers, and one for pupils who enter intermediate schools. In a comprehensive system there would have to be one method only, and choice of a single, new method is another decision that would have to be taken before a comprehensive system could be established. This, also, is dealt with in Part II of the Consultative Document.

In order that all opinions may be considered the Government invites the public at large to submit their views by the end of the year and undertakes to give them full consideration. It proposes also to arrange early bi-lateral consultation with the organisations which would be most closely affected by school reorganisation. In addition it proposes to set up working parties on 3 matters of particular complexity:-

- i. new arrangements for the management and finance of schools, and on boarding and preparatory departments;
- ii. administrative and legislative changes arising from other aspects of reorganisation;
- iii. transfer at 11+ in an interim period before reorganisation is complete.

I appreciate that in this period of financial stringencies and uncertainties the Government may not be able to make available the additional public funds as rapidly as would be needed and that this may affect the pace of reorganisation. No decisions will be taken by the Government until it has not only received and considered the views and advice that it expects to obtain but also taken full account of cost. What I hope for now is the most vigorous public debate on the subject which will involve not only the experts and those committed to education but members of the public as well. I know that this is sometimes difficult in the context of the present security situation but as well as beating off the terrorist Northern Ireland must adapt to a changing world. All I ask is that the debate be concluded not on the basis of preconceived ideas but on the basis of the ideas in this document.