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# NEWS

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**LORD MELCHETT ANNOUNCES GOVERNMENT DECISION ON COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATION**

Minister of State, Lord Melchett, today announced the Government's decision to introduce comprehensive education throughout Northern Ireland and to abolish the present 11+ Selection Procedure.

Lord Melchett, who is the Minister responsible for the Department of Education, made his announcement at a press conference at Parliament Buildings, Stormont, and it came almost a year after the publication in July last of the Consultative Document on the Reorganisation of Secondary Education.

In a statement setting out the Government's viewpoint (now available at Her Majesty's Stationery Office, Chichester Street, Belfast, price: 25p ) the Minister emphasised that change should take place through evolution, not revolution; through a development growing out of the existing educational system, not its destruction; through an advancement from the present schools, not their retardation. The Government, he said, was strongly of the view that getting reorganisation right was more important than doing it quickly. But he also said that it would be undesirable for the process of restructuring to be drawn out for an unnecessarily lengthy period of time.

The statement said: "After the most careful consideration the Government has decided that it should now accept the majority recommendation of the Burges Report and I therefore declare the Government's intention to eliminate selection of 11+ through a restructuring of the educational system. We are convinced that the

uncertainty about the future of secondary education which has existed for many years must be brought to an end. The Government believes that it is educationally unsound to divide children at the age of 11 and that a restructuring of the school system will provide better educational opportunities for all children."

The statement points out that there will be a great deal of flexibility in the restructuring of secondary education; and that the Government attaches particular importance to ensuring that plans are drawn up locally by the Area Boards, in consultation with individual schools.

For the next immediate steps the Government has decided that transfer into secondary education in 1978 should be on the basis of the procedure put forward by the Working Party on Alternative Transfer Arrangements - this means that the 11+ examination will not be held again in Northern Ireland. The Area Education and Library Boards will now be invited to undertake the planning of the restructuring of secondary education in their areas and the Minister considers that particular attention should be paid to the possible development of sixth form and tertiary colleges.

The Boards are also being invited to consider the best method for their areas of transfer from primary to secondary education in a comprehensive system.

The Minister announced the Government's decision to establish three Working Parties - one general and two specialist.

The General Working Party, which will be chaired by Dr R J Dickson, Chief Officer of the North-Eastern Education and Library Board, is to examine all the administrative and legislative aspects of developing secondary education along comprehensive lines (other than the two special issues which the other Working Parties will consider). One of the specialist Working Parties, which Dr J M Benn, former Permanent Secretary of the Department of Education, has agreed to chair, will consider the changes that must be made to ensure that voluntary schools continue as a major part of the new system and particularly the financial arrangements. The membership of these Working Parties will be drawn from the teachers' associations, the Education and Library Boards, the Catholic

Maintained Schools' Commission and the Association of Governing Bodies of Grammar Schools. The other specialist Working Party will consider the changes that will have to be made in school management. The Minister said he hoped to announce separately the names of the Chairman and members of this Working Party, which would be comprised of independent persons who would take a completely new look at the way schools should be managed in Northern Ireland.

Lord Melchett said: "To sum up, the Government considers that the system of secondary education in Northern Ireland has to be restructured. But it has set its face firmly against rushing headlong into restructuring. It has determined that the 11+ examination should not be held again and that the alternative transfer procedure should be adopted for an interim period. It has determined not on a single system of comprehensive schooling for the whole of Northern Ireland but on local planning by local people for local circumstances. And it attaches particular importance, in the interests of children, teachers, parents and the community at large to the most careful preparation to ensure that transition is a developing and not a disruptive process. The Government is in full sympathy with those who cherish the unique features of the Northern Ireland secondary schools. It is convinced that, with good sense and co-operation, restructuring can and should be undertaken in a way that protects these and carries them forward into a new system of secondary schooling that, through the breadth of educational opportunity which it provides, will best meet the needs of all the children of Northern Ireland."

The Minister's statement said:-

1. The last nine months in Northern Ireland have seen the most intense and extensive debate on secondary education that has ever taken place anywhere in the United Kingdom. The closing date for the contributions invited in the Consultative Document was last Easter. Taken in total they are, by any standard, impressive. Almost without exception the organisations involved in the field of education consulted fully with those with whose interests they are concerned, and made their contributions on the basis of the views they obtained; many carefully considered personal contributions were also received. A resumé of the contributions will be published as soon as possible.