

House of Commons

Catholic Schools (Admissions) Debate 30 April 2014

[Jim Dobbin *in the Chair*]

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dobbin. As we gather today to discuss matters of education and those who dedicate their lives to it, all our thoughts and prayers are naturally with the family of Ann Maguire and all the children and staff at Corpus Christi Catholic college in Leeds.

This debate was originally in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier). He secured the debate, but he sends his apologies for being unable to attend owing to a long-standing engagement at the Ministry of Defence in Glasgow for his work on reserves. I am grateful to him for the opportunity to speak in his place and to Mr Speaker for allowing the transfer.

The Catholic Church is this country's largest provider of secondary education, and it is the second biggest name in primary education. Altogether, the Catholic Church educates more than 800,000 children in more than 2,000 schools. The Catholic Church has always seen education as vital to the formation and development of the whole person, and historically it has prioritised the building of schools in England, even over building churches.

At their heart, Catholic schools always have a mission to provide for underprivileged children and serve a Catholic population that has primarily been made up of many waves of immigrants from France, Ireland, south Asia, the Philippines, Africa, eastern Europe and elsewhere. Under the Education Act 1944—the Butler Act—Catholic schools became voluntary-aided schools, part of the state system but with a distinct Catholic ethos guaranteed through various legal protections. Unlike the Church of England, which is the established Church in this country, the Catholic Church has always established its schools primarily to educate Catholic children and puts substantial resources into that effort. These days, the figure is some £20 million a year.

Catholic schools today are high performers in the state sector. On average, they get higher Ofsted ratings for overall effectiveness, pastoral care and various other criteria. Their results are above average at the ages of seven, 11 and 16, and they perform strongly on value-added measures. Such schools are also plugged into their local communities. At secondary level, two in five Catholic schools are judged by Ofsted to be making an outstanding contribution to their local community, which compares with one in four schools overall. A key question is whether all that is just a coincidence and, if not, what the driving factors are behind that performance.

Robert Ffello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on standing in for the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier), who secured this debate. I often hear from a small number of constituents that they feel Catholic schools must be selecting only the cream of pupils. Would the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) like to put on record his observations on that point?

Damian Hinds: I will happily do so: I contend that the ethos and character of Catholic schools, although they are not the only factors, are key contributors to the performance of such schools in all senses. It is categorically not the case that Catholic schools get better results by being some sort of middle-class filtering service.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing this debate. I associate myself with his remarks on the tragedy in Leeds, which is close to my constituency. It is an awful thing to happen. I press the hon. Gentleman on the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Ffello). When I chaired the Select Committee on Education, we found real evidence that many Christian schools, both Catholic and Anglican—I am an active Christian myself—manage to get far fewer people from poorer backgrounds than one would expect from any interpretation of the population both inside and outside the Catholic community. There is evidence, and surely the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) must worry about that.

Damian Hinds: That would be a worry. I never had the privilege of serving under the hon. Gentleman's distinguished chairmanship of the Education Committee, although when I subsequently served on the Committee, we had a session on similar matters, and we did not find that to be the case. Depending on our point of view and the point that one is trying to make, we can draw boundaries around schools in different ways. We can draw an immediate boundary or a wider boundary. A little later, I will go through some of the actual statistics on the intake of Catholic schools.

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman is being kind in giving way again. The Education Committee's report—I am looking at the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner), who was a member of the Committee at the time—recommended a mandatory code for admissions, which made a difference. Under the mandatory code, schools have to obey a fair admissions policy. That is why, when the Education Committee returned to the matter, many of the problems had been resolved.

Damian Hinds: Catholic schools and all maintained, state-funded schools are, of course, subject to fair admissions procedures, which I will address later.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): Will my hon. Friend bear in mind that some areas have no boundaries other than the sea? The Isle of Wight has the best secondary school, a Catholic-Anglican school, and it can be chosen by anyone.

Damian Hinds: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's unique geographical perspective. This comes up time and again, and I will shortly address some of those instances, but on the key point of whether Catholic schools are some sort of filtering device for middle-class, wealthy and bright kids, the answer is no. That would be a fundamental misunderstanding of the demographic profile of this country's Catholic population, the location of those schools and the communities that they serve.

There is a school about a mile from here across the river that may be a contender for England's most diverse school: St Anne's Catholic primary school in SE11. The school's pupils come from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. Half of key stage 2 pupils are classed as disadvantaged, with most coming from the immediate wards, which are among the poorest in London. The school's deprivation indicator is in the top 10%, but there are also families from higher income brackets. Altogether, pupils speak 32 different mother tongues, and 99% of pupils have English as an additional language, which is what we used to call English as a foreign language. The one thing that almost all pupils have in common is their faith, with more than 95% being baptised Catholics.

That is a striking example—that is why we politicians use such examples—but overall the profile of Catholic schools is more diverse than schools in the maintained sector in general. At primary level, the proportion of schools at which more than 5% of pupils do not speak English as their mother tongue is 57% for Catholic schools and 38% for schools overall. Some 34.5% of Catholic primary school pupils are from ethnic minority backgrounds, compared with 28.5% in the maintained sector as a whole; at secondary level, the figures are 30% for Catholic schools and 24% for other schools.

The proportion of children on free school meals at Catholic schools is somewhat lower on average than at other schools, and there are various explanations for that, but I do not think we know the answer conclusively. One thing that we do know conclusively is that pupils at Catholic schools tend to come from poorer places than children at schools in general. At secondary level, 17% of children at Catholic schools are from the most deprived wards, compared with 12% for schools overall. At both primary and secondary, Catholic schools over-index in the bottom four deciles and under-index in the top six deciles.

The diversity of Catholic schools, notwithstanding the water boundaries of some places, is partly due to the potential for much larger catchment areas. Typically, a Catholic school may have a catchment area 10 times the size of a typical community school's catchment area. I saw a bit of that in my own schooling. The school that I went to in south Manchester had kids from leafy north Cheshire, but it also had kids from Stretford, Old Trafford, Stockport and Warrington. It really had a very wide intake. Schools must comply with the schools admissions code, and over-subscription policies mean that Catholic schools typically give priority to Catholic children over the wider area and welcome others

where there is remaining capacity. That system enables more parents who desire a Catholic education for their children to get one, bearing in mind that it is a minority religion in this country, so the population is likely to be more sparsely spread.

As has been mentioned, the admissions criteria of faith schools make regular media space-fillers. Headlines have included, “Faith schools ‘biased towards middle classes’”, “Faith schools ‘skewing admissions rules’” and, “Faith school admissions ‘unfair to immigrants’”. Those came respectively from the *Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian* after the publication of the schools adjudicator report in 2010. As was alluded to, we had the chief adjudicator into the Education Committee to discuss that report, which was extremely fair and balanced and made hardly any reference to faith schools. Somehow, between the publication of that report, the press conference and journalists filing their copy, the story became about bell ringing, schools insisting that parents clean churches and giving priority to white middle-class families. I do not know about you, Mr Dobbin, but I struggle to think of many Catholic churches that even have a bell tower. Anyone saying that people who clean churches having priority somehow advantages white middle-class families has a poor understanding of the demographics of those who clean churches.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that the London Oratory school withdrew that requirement from its admissions criteria as a result of the adjudicator’s ruling?

Damian Hinds: I will tell the hon. Gentleman what I acknowledge: there are 2,000 Catholic schools in this country, and one of them is the London Oratory school. When these stories come up, they always centre on literally a handful of schools, virtually all of which are in west or south-west London. They are in no way representative of Catholic education as a whole, whether in location, resident population or type of school and so on.

Mr Sheerman: We all know why London Oratory became so well known: Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister, sent his children there. I always defended that, because he was, as I understand it, the first Prime Minister ever to send his children to a state school. To put the record straight for anyone reading the report of this debate, before the reforms, when I was Chair of the Education Committee, the crucial thing was not just the number of children on free school meals, but the numbers of looked-after children and children with special educational needs. Things have not much improved, but I have to put on record, as a lay canon at Wakefield cathedral, that we often found that Anglican schools were worse than Catholic schools.

Damian Hinds: That is probably a road that we do not want to go down today. Overall, notwithstanding the poster child cases that can be found on occasion—

Kevin Brennan: You mentioned the cleaning.

Damian Hinds: I say gently to the shadow Minister that that was represented as faith schools plural, not as one school where it was the case. The figures speak for themselves. In 2010, 337 Catholic secondary schools made 54,830 offers of a place to year 7 pupils. The number of complaints to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator about the application of the admissions code in Catholic schools was nine. In fact, there were proportionally fewer complaints about Catholic schools than there were for schools of no denomination.

There is a view that no admissions procedure or criteria should include a religious element and that if these are high-quality, sought-after schools, they should be made available equally to all, so that more people, or at least people living closer to the school, would benefit. I contend that that misses the point of what makes Catholic schools distinctive and sought after. If they were open to all, they would lose their distinctive character—not immediately, but over time.

Schools can withstand some variety, which is a good thing, in admissions. The proportion of non-Catholic children at Catholic schools today is 30%, which is probably higher than most people realise. A 50% cap on admissions would gradually erode that character in two ways. It would not only erode it directly by diluting the religious nature of the school’s population, but indirectly, because Catholic

parents would cease to see a distinction between those schools and entirely non-denominational schools, as my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Mr Hoban) effectively argued in a recent debate in this place. Put simply, a half-Catholic school is not the same thing as a Catholic school.

The 50% cap is not in the coalition agreement, but is an interpretation of some of its wording. We would probably all agree that it was well-intentioned, because there is concern about diversity, inclusiveness and mixing in schools, and I understand the sensitivities around those topics. As I hope that I have demonstrated, Catholic schools are more diverse than the average, with mixing beyond that available in the average school. The cap is inhibiting the creation of new quality schools that will be just as sought after. It is clear that the 50% cap directly precludes the creation of Catholic free schools, because the Catholic Church feels unable to support, with all the implications of commitment that that brings, new so-called Catholic schools that would in the end have to turn away some families seeking a Catholic education for their children in favour of others who happen to live a little closer to the school.

There is an alternative, which is to create a new voluntary-aided school that can subsequently convert to an academy, and the same result could be had that way. That is not an impossible route to pursue, but there are two problems with it. First, it is a somewhat convoluted approach to reach that end, inevitably carrying additional inefficiencies and costs. Secondly, it is not as straightforward as a free school application, because voluntary-aided applications do not have the same priority as free school applications. The applicants for the new voluntary-aided school at Richmond experienced a legal challenge from the British Humanist Association, which claimed that the Government had to look first at free school applications that would have the 50% cap. That legal challenge failed, but it is inevitable that parents will feel some uncertainty about what will happen with future openings. That could affect the number of applications and the viability of such a new school.

Kevin Brennan: The hon. Gentleman mentioned that voluntary-aided schools do not have the same priority as new free schools. Why?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman is a man of letters, and he will understand that I can answer the question only in the sense of why I said that, which is because it is my understanding. It is for the Minister to talk about how these things work in practice, and he might want to contend that point. I have some questions for the Minister. First, has the Department made projections of demand for Catholic places at schools, the growth or otherwise in the Catholic population and the propensity of parents of those children to seek a Catholic school? Secondly, has the effect of the 50% cap on applications for faith-based schools been assessed? Thirdly, would the Department consider a pilot of a Catholic free school without the 50% cap? Fourthly, is it possible to construct a new fast-track, voluntary-aided through to converter academy route that would effectively be a single process? In conclusion, Catholic schools are a key part of the education landscape in this country, and have been for a long time. They are diverse—more diverse, in fact, than the average—and that diversity includes already having a substantial proportion of non-Catholic children. They also have something special about them, and that specialness comes at least partly as a direct result of their religious nature.

Robert Ffello: The hon. Gentleman is being extremely generous with his time. On that point, it is the special nature of Catholic schools that appeals to many people of other religions. For example, in Stoke-on-Trent, a large proportion of the Muslim community want their children to go to the local Catholic school because of its Catholic nature. That might seem a little bizarre at first, but that is the reality.

Damian Hinds: I agree with the hon. Gentleman entirely. Many Catholic schools have large numbers of children of other faiths. As I came to my close, the point I was making was that the specialness of Catholic schools comes at least partly as a direct result of their religious nature. I suggest that that helps to promote cohesion and community spirit, rather than detract from it. That specialness would inevitably be eroded over time by enforcing a lower cap on admissions made on the basis of faith. As Cardinal Vincent Nichols—as he is now—said in 2006, when faced with a not entirely similar proposal,

“Catholic schools make a positive and clear contribution, and do so in an open and proven manner. They are part of the solution. They should not be undermined.”

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) for introducing this significant and important debate. The backdrop to debates on education is often the London scenario. Frankly, I fail to recognise the landscape spoken about in such debates: the fierce competition for places; sharp elbows; tiger mums; socially-segregated intakes; and back-door selection via baptism and church attendance. I come from an area where half the schools are denominational, with the bulk of them being Roman Catholic. Unlike the Minister, I did not go to a Roman Catholic school, but in the '70s and early '80s I taught at a Catholic comprehensive in Bootle, where the situation was very different from London: St Kevin's in Kirkby was not the Oratory.

My school was run by the Salesians, a religious order that originally set out to look after the poor of Milan. When I taught there, that spirit prevailed, although over time as an order they had migrated into selective and boarding schools, as is often the way. However, some of the original fervour was certainly there: the headmaster taught remedial maths and, even after he resigned as headmaster, continued to do so. When I joined, the school had just amalgamated with another Catholic denominational school, St Joan of Arc, which was again far from being like the Oratory. That was a school that, throughout its history, had had a proud reputation of never having entered a pupil for a public exam. It was a dockland school and the only qualification that pupils left with was the—slightly discounted now—Bootle school leaving certificate. In fact, to get a job in that area, one needed only to befriend to the local shop steward to be assured a job; one did not need to be particularly good at maths or anything like that. The comedian, Tom O'Connor, honed his act in such a school.

I was latterly a governor and a parent. My children went to Christ the King school in Southport, which was a community school with a tradition of caring for pupils; it did not expel them even when they had appreciable problems. When I reflect on that, I must say that the system that we have got is not a planned system, but one that has evolved. The state took responsibility for education only after the churches had spent many decades doing so in the 19th century. It funded what was there, but, at that time, there was political sensitivity that we might now find difficult to understand about Rome on the rates, or, in fact, any church on the rates, particularly in my party. The solution was the funding of religious autonomy but only in return for a capital contribution: the Butler settlement. Congregations did indeed partly fund the schools and, as a result, got certain privileges.

That deal has now been superseded by the Blair Government and the coalition Government with a new deal that I do not claim to understand perfectly: it does not have the same funding snags, but there certainly is a protracted debate about admissions and admission policy. That policy has been developed by the coalition, but I do not claim to understand the rationale perfectly. Perhaps the Minister can help me with that.

However, insofar as the Government make the offer to religious bodies to promote schools, it is almost certainly not because they want to promote a religious ethos or because they believe that, because those schools have a religious ethos, they are good per se. The promoters certainly believe that, but secular Governments in a secular, pluralistic society cannot usually claim that. The argument appears to be that there is a demand and will to provide these schools in many parts of the country, that educational standards are good—I think that that is recognised widely—and that no social objectives are being significantly impaired.

That is a point on which most Members party to this debate are probably on a different side from, say, the British Humanist Association, which regards serious social objectives as being compromised by the sheer existence of faith schools: it talks about the promotion of sectarianism and the like. That claim is contentious, but that is not the issue of this debate. The issue today is whether schools set up for an avowedly religious purpose function in a way that separates pupils by class or ability, because that, surely, is what the Government are against and the real question is whether there is a case for saying that.

There seem to be three bits of evidence to look at. One is the disparity that occasionally exists between a school's social mix and the neighbourhood. It must be acknowledged that that exists. Secondly, frequently cited is parents affecting religious affiliation or enthusiasm to get their children into faith schools and that schools overtly collude in that. Thirdly, which I think is the point made by the former

Chair of the Education Committee, the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), there is some evidence that, in faith schools, there are relatively lower numbers of pupils on free school meals compared with other schools.

None of that strikes me as conclusive. As the hon. Member for East Hampshire pointed out, a disparity between neighbourhood and social mix should sometimes be expected. In an area where Catholics are very much a minority population, such as Salisbury, where there is only the one Catholic church, there will be a difference between the families immediately adjacent to the Catholic school and those who send their children to that school, but that would equally apply to other faith schools. A good example is in Liverpool, where one of the most popular and successful schools is King David high school, which is a Jewish school that does not necessarily reflect the wider social area in which it sits. I do not think, therefore, that that argument is conclusive.

Equally, I do not think that it is conclusive to point out what we probably all know: sometimes, parents affect a degree of religiosity to get their children into a school that they might not otherwise succeed in doing. That argument is hard to address, because it is not possible for schools—or churches, for that matter—to have proper insight into the fervour or motives of the people who turn up en masse on a Sunday. We surely cannot ask the Government to do that either.

Therefore, we come to the crucial point, which is the most difficult point for faith schools to address: a lower proportion of children receive free school meals in faith schools than in state schools in comparable areas. It cannot be supposed that Catholics, or those of any other faith, are innately prosperous and unlikely to be on benefits. That is a dilemma for Catholic schools, but also for the Government. If there is a remedy to that, that would be for the faith schools to be more rigorous in applying the faith criterion rather than any of their others, and I am not sure that the Government could advocate that.

None of the solutions would satisfy the critics of faith schools. I regard the Government's policy as a muddle to some extent, though not a pernicious or problematic muddle. I do not see how what we have in the way of faith schools at the moment can concern a Government who are seeking to address the joint objectives of promoting educational achievement and ensuring that all pupils have fair access to it.

Mr Mark Hoban (Fareham) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) for opening the debate in such a thorough way. I will not speak for long, having aired the issues in an earlier debate, to which the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), responded. I am pleased to see the Minister for Schools, my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Laws), in the Chamber, because he might be able to shed some light on some of the discussions that his colleague and I had in the previous debate.

It is important that we recognise the role of the Catholic Church in providing education. I, too, am a product of a Catholic education. The role of Catholic schools has been widely praised, with the most recent example I have coming from the Deputy Prime Minister. He praised faith schools, rightly highlighting:

“In my own view the crucial thing for faith schools, and I think all the best faith schools do this, is to make sure they act as engines of integration and not silos of segregation.”

He made that comment on visiting a Catholic school in east London, which perhaps provides an antidote to the slightly obsessive nature of the discussion about faith schools elsewhere in London. The Church has a long tradition of providing education, in particular in urban areas, initially to meet the needs of migrants from Ireland, not only during the great famine, but in subsequent waves of migration as well. The view of the Catholic hierarchy, the bishops, when they established schools in England and Wales, was that this was a good way to enable migrants to integrate into the wider community, by providing them with the opportunities for education that would enable them to progress in different careers. Certainly in my own family, coming from the north-east, some found such opportunities to progress in particular through education. That is highly valued, and the role in integration is still played now with subsequent waves of migration, especially with migrants from eastern Europe. Also, in many communities throughout the country, large numbers of people from the

Philippines can be seen at mass; they are in this country to work in the health service. Again, we are helping to integrate people into the wider community.

Integration is reflected in the demographics of Catholic schools. They are ethnically and socially diverse, reflecting the Church itself. To use my own experience, the Catholic school that I attended in Durham attracted pupils from a wide area, not only from leafy, middle-class housing estates in the centre of Durham, but from the former pit villages around Durham. It was a socially diverse school, different from the nearest school, which predominantly served leafy, middle-class housing estates. There is something about the catchment area of Catholic schools, and their coverage, which means that they have a much wider range.

Robert Ffello: The hon. Gentleman's comments put me in mind of my constituency and of my city of Stoke-on-Trent. If we compare Stoke-on-Trent with Kensington, Chelsea or Westminster, they are in almost completely different worlds, let alone different cities. Stoke-on-Trent could hardly be described as incredibly affluent, but the Catholic and indeed Church of England schools do a good job of educating people in the area.

Mr Hoban: Indeed. That diversity of social class is important, although I would counsel a note of caution. It is not only about what happens in Stoke-on-Trent; churches and Church schools in central London are socially diverse, and we should not get away with thinking that Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea are predominantly or exclusively upper middle-class areas.

Robert Ffello: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to come back on that point. Absolutely—I am merely illustrating a point, in case colleagues refer to the Oratory, which is not the same as Stoke-on-Trent. However, I take his point entirely.

Mr Hoban: The Oratory is socially diverse, because it allows in the children of both Prime Ministers and Deputy Prime Ministers these days. We should not forget that diversity.

The catchment area mean that Catholic schools, rather than serving a narrow cross-section of the population, tend to serve broader communities. They are not aimed exclusively at either the children who live in pit villages or those who live in middle-class housing estates.

Free school meals have been mentioned by a number of hon. Members and the issue is a cause for concern, which is why the Catholic Education Service has looked at it carefully to understand some of the barriers. The service highlighted cultural aversion, immigration status and language as potential barriers to people claiming free school meals. We need to understand that a bit more: is there a factor here that we need to take more action on?

I have a concern about Government policy in the area—I do not have many concerns about Government policy, because I am by nature loyal.

Robert Ffello: I paused before intervening, because I thought the hon. Gentleman was going to move on to talk about the figures. It is worth putting on record that in 2012 the difference in the number of those receiving free school meals nationally and of those receiving them in Catholic schools was about 0.7%; in 2013, the figure might have risen to about 2%. It is worth putting the scale of the difference into the context.

Mr Hoban: Indeed. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, although that closer difference is between secondary schools; the gap is slightly wider for primary schools. Nevertheless, we need to get to the bottom of the issue and to understand it.

Since Catholic schools are so diverse and so inclusive, I have a problem in understanding the nature of Government policy in the area. Why is the admissions cap in place? Why has faith been singled out for such treatment? No other cap is in place and there is no cap for ethnicity or social class; the focus appears to be entirely on faith, and yet we can see from the track record of Catholic schools that they are more representative of the population and more diverse in ethnicity and social class than schools as a whole. I find it hard to understand why the barrier is in place.

When my hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk responded as the Minister in the previous debate, she talked about the need to demonstrate broad support in the community for such schools and

the need for access. I could understand that if it applied to all new free schools and academies and if there were similar constraints in place on other aspects of diversity, but there are not. The cap applies only to faith schools. In a situation in which a faith school is oversubscribed, that oversubscription demonstrates that a school is popular and that people want to send their children to it, so it is more likely to have a broader range of applicants. My concern, if we are concerned about exclusivity and segregationism, is with schools of a particular faith that are undersubscribed. What message of ethos or approach is therefore being sent to other people in the community who are not of that faith? We need to be clear about why things are happening and why the cap is in place.

I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will provide the logic, because I cannot see it the moment. If I look at other factors involved in setting up free schools, one such school might be in the middle of a middle-class housing estate where there is a lack of capacity, and yet there is no requirement to ship pupils in from other areas. Such a school could serve exclusively children from that middle-class area. There is no constraint on that or any cap to require pupils coming from elsewhere. I am not sure what mischief the Government are seeking to address by such a narrow approach to one aspect of admissions policy.

My right hon. Friend the Minister might be able to shed some light on one aspect of the issue, because he was there at the birth of the coalition. The cap flows from language in the coalition agreement, but I am not clear whose ask that was. Was it an ask of my party or of his? I suspect that I know the answer, because the Liberal Democrat manifesto for which the Minister stood in 2010 pledged to prevent faith schools selecting on the basis of their religion. I suspect that the policy flows from that manifesto commitment. Since he and others have now had experience of Catholic schools, he might feel that that manifesto commitment is no longer appropriate. The Liberal Democrats might seek to change that. I will be interested to see if that is their policy.

I do not see where that commitment sits logically in an admissions policy. Why have the Government decided on that one demographic characteristic, above all others, in determining admissions policy? I do not think it is logical. It is perceived to be unfair and discriminatory, and is certainly preventing the establishment of new Catholic free schools and academies that could support the demand for places and want to be able to offer a Catholic education but do not want to be in the position, as would be the case under this policy, of having to turn away Catholic parents. That is the barrier—those schools would have to turn Catholics away under the policy.

I would like my right hon. Friend to explain the logic behind the policy—why it is faith that has been singled out, and no other demographic characteristic.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier) on securing it and—more amazingly—my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) on starting the debate with such aplomb. I am slightly disappointed that the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) has left the Chamber; frankly, I did not understand what he was going on about and would have enjoyed a debate with him.

One concern for people and particularly for Catholics who send their children to Catholic school is that when topics such as this are debated in Parliament, the debate seems to become an assault on the values of those parents and on the fact that they choose to send their children to a school that selects by faith. They are often attacked by various campaigning organisations for trying to be separatist and for not wanting to be part of a wider society. Frankly, such attacks are so ridiculous as to be untrue. Although it is not quite an interest, I should declare that I only ever attended Catholic schools, so I have that narrow vision, as it were. My parents taught principally in Catholic schools, although they taught in other types of state school as well.

I am glad to see the Minister in his place today. I hope that he is not overly influenced by Liberal Youth—a Liberal Democrat group of students and young people in education that has joined the British Humanist Association in a coalition against faith schools—particularly on the admissions code. I am pleased that he was part of a Government that resisted amendments trying to remove any selection based on faith during the passage of the Academies Act 2010 in the early days of this Parliament. It was important that we took that step at the time. I share the views already put forward by hon. Members on the impact of the 50% cap on admissions to free schools.

I know that this debate is going out to the world, but let us talk openly: was the issue that small minority faiths would set up particular kinds of schools and the Government were concerned that that would lead to extremism of one kind or another being taught in our schools and being paid for by the taxpayer? If that was the case, it was an overreaction. As we know, the setting up of a free school is subject to stringent tests, which apply to some elements of the curriculum. Although certain things are not banned for academies or free schools, those schools still have to satisfy the Department for Education and Ofsted that they are providing a suitable education that covers a broad spectrum—albeit that the minutiae of the curriculum are not mandated in the same way as for other state-maintained schools.

We need to set the right tone. We must allow new schools to develop where they are needed. My hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire has already referred to the extended process in Richmond, which led to considerable opposition both politically and from other groups that deliberately tried to stop the school being set up.

Dr Coffey: I have been reflecting while away from the Chamber. I did not mean to give the impression that I thought the hon. Member for Huddersfield did not know what he was talking about; I just did not understand what he was referring to. I normally enjoy debates with him, and I wish he was here so that we could have further discussion and dialogue.

To return to the meat of the discussion—the reason for the 50% cap—I could understand if the Government's intention was to prevent the establishment of pockets of extremist teaching in schools. However, there are other ways to achieve that. Indeed, the current inspections by Ofsted, the Department for Education and Birmingham city council show that there are other ways to proceed when concerns are raised about the possibility of manipulation. I am not convinced that the hurdle of a 50% cap is necessary to stop such alleged activity.

On whether people are excluded, I do not like the attitude that claims that Catholic schools try to cream off the top, or that people are deliberately excluded because they are poor. That is very far from my experience of the Church and of my time as a governor of Bishop Challoner Catholic secondary school in Basingstoke. I have been a governor of other schools as well. It costs absolutely nothing to be a Catholic. If anyone has the desire, ignited by a sense of mission and the faith of the Church, that is all that is required. It is irrelevant in our Church whether someone earns as much as another person. Long may that continue. People do not have to worry about whether their name is on the wall on a plaque, for having given something, or whether their family has their own pew, paid for in times past. That is all irrelevant. People try to smear the whole idea of faith schools, using data that consists of such red herrings, rather than entering into serious debate.

A comparison can be made with membership of a political party. We can go anywhere in the country, and we know we will find our local Conservative association, Labour club or Liberal Democrat association, which we can hook up to, and where we can be with like-minded people. We may not agree with the other members on everything, but we can come together in the cause of a common interest. The same can be true of any Church or religion.

I have only just learned, from reading *The Independent* during the debate, that my old school, St Mary's college, Crosby, is trying to become a free school, but the archdiocese of Liverpool is blocking that on the grounds that more than two thirds of children who go there are Catholic. I agree with the archdiocese that it would be extraordinary to allow a school designated as Catholic to turn away pupils because they are Catholic, as a result of the arbitrary 50% cap. It is important to remove those arbitrary measures. Distinguished former pupils of the school are Cardinal Vincent Nichols and Roger McGough. I could add the noble Lord Birt and myself, but that would be boasting and probably a sin. It is completely false to try to compare Roman Catholic schools with Church of England schools. The Church of England is the established Church in England, and anyone may attend a Church of England school—such schools have been set up in almost every parish—just as anyone may be buried in a Church of England churchyard. Under our constitution, anyone may have access to the rights of the Church of England. The Government had to go to extraordinary lengths with the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 to legislate specifically for the Church of England on the grounds that anyone may

marry in a Church of England church if they have not previously been married. The analogies are completely false.

What can we do about it? I would like a change of Government policy, but I would also encourage Catholic schools and priests, and the Catholic Education Service, to keep the pressure up. I remember that when there was a proposal to change schools' admission codes to prioritise siblings over children of the Catholic faith, I and other governors, particularly parent and faith governors, fought against that on the grounds that when people move to a new area, it is not unreasonable for them to want to join the school attached to their Church and where they make new friendships. I would encourage Catholic schools to consider that rather than automatically going down the usual local education authority model of prioritising siblings.

I think it was Pope St Pius X who, when asked to prioritise among a church, school or seminary, always went for a school, recognising that passing on the faith and giving children a good education so that they go on to become pillars of society was an important role of the Church. St Ignatius of Loyola famously said:

“Give me the boy at seven and I will show you the man.”

Many religious orders were established solely to teach children. It is right that we continue to keep up the concept of faith schools; it is right that dioceses tend to pay for schools, the land and so on; and it is right that we in the House continue to uphold the right of parents to send their children to the school of their choice, which is often motivated by faith.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is a pleasure, Mr Dobbin, to participate in this debate under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) on his charity in taking on this debate when the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier) was unable to. As ever, he led the debate ably and elucidated the issues very well.

The hon. Member for East Hampshire mentioned that free schools—this may come up in the Minister's response—are given priority over the setting-up of a new voluntary-aided school. If a new Catholic school is needed because there is demand from a sufficient number of Catholics in an area, why should free schools or any other schools be given priority over voluntary-aided schools? The Minister could solve the problem here and now, and perhaps he will pick that up in his response. I do not see why that should not be possible.

The hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) told us that he taught at St Kevin's school in Kirkby.

John Pugh: To put the record straight, I should say that I used St Kevin's in Kirkby as an example; I believe it does not exist any more. I taught at Salesian high school.

Kevin Brennan: I apologise, Mr Dobbin. I obviously did not listen carefully enough to the hon. Gentleman's philosophical—as always—contribution. In view of his usual intellectual contributions, perhaps he should have taught at St Thomas Aquinas high school.

John Pugh: There was indeed a St Thomas Aquinas high school down the road from Salesian high. It was known locally as “Tommy Ackers”.

Kevin Brennan: I understand that school could squeeze the pupils into very small spaces.

We also had contributions from the hon. Member for Fareham (Mr Hoban), who referred to free schools, and the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), who thought that some critics of Catholic admissions and education were sneering. I congratulate all hon. Members on their contributions and interventions.

Like other hon. Members here, I attended a Catholic school and I am a Roman Catholic. I attended St David's Roman Catholic school in Cwmbran and St Alban's Roman Catholic comprehensive school in Pontypool, which, as was said earlier, drew from a wide catchment area in that part of what was first Monmouthshire and then Gwent. It included my home town, Cwmbran, and Pontypool, Blaenavon, Abertillery, Ebbw Vale and other areas of the Gwent valleys.

Given my name, which is Irish, hon. Members may not be surprised that I had a Catholic education, and the names on the school register were diverse. I shared classes with people such as Michael

Sczymanski, Endonio Cordero, Maria Bracchi and the usual mixture of people with names such as Mario Evans and so on. There were many Italians, Irish and Poles mingling with the Welsh, and they were a diverse and interesting group of colleagues.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I should put on the record the fact that although I have not yet had the opportunity of contributing to the debate, I am here as someone who also attended Catholic schools: St Mary's in Hexham and Sacred Heart in Newcastle. I agree with much of what has been said today and will be interested to hear my hon. Friend's response to some of the concerns that seem to arise from the complexities of the free schools policy.

Kevin Brennan: I thank my hon. Friend. I will say a little about that and about the Labour party's policy on Catholic education and faith schools more generally.

Labour strongly supports faith schools in our state education system. I quote from a recent speech made in the midlands by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt), the shadow Secretary of State:

“Across the country, we can all point to many successful, collaborative, pluralist faith schools working with children of particular denominations and of no faith at all.”

However, he also said:

“But we also need to be clear about the duties which a state-funded school is expected to fulfil.”

In that context, he was obviously talking about some of the current issues in the city of Birmingham, which the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal mentioned. It is right that there are also duties on faith schools when they are funded by taxpayers: they are to participate positively in the family of schools in their area and to ensure that they have a fair admissions policy.

I recognise and commend the work by the Catholic Education Service to look into the whole issue of admissions, in response to some of the criticisms aired in the press about admissions to Catholic schools, which hon. Members have highlighted. I commend that work because it has gone to trouble to look into why it seems that Catholic schools admit a lower proportion of pupils claiming free school meals than there are in the general school population.

The service is as baffled as some of us that that seems to be the case despite the fact that the areas that many pupils come from are deprived and despite the great diversity of children attending Catholic schools. It has made a great effort to look into the issue and I commend it; it is important not to be complacent. Whether we are Catholics, Anglicans or have no faith, we should not be unwilling to shine a light on admissions to taxpayer-funded schools. There is a duty for those admissions to be fair. The Catholic Education Service has done us all a great

service by undertaking the work and by taking the issue seriously, rather than simply trying to fend off any criticism. It has met it head on, demonstrating—as it has done very well in its research—that Catholic schools are extremely diverse and take pupils from all sorts of backgrounds and areas.

As the Catholic Education Service pointed out in some documents—in its briefing papers on the issue and in its cultural diversity and free schools document, which I have read, explaining the low take-up of free school meals in Catholic schools—Catholic schools are extremely diverse, often with large numbers of people from immigrant backgrounds. In a sense, that is the history of Catholic schools in the United Kingdom. I am conscious of the fact that in my own case, my father came from the west of Ireland. He married a Welsh girl and was an immigrant into the UK.

As I said, I commend the Catholic Education Service for its work, for taking the criticism seriously and for being prepared to put the work in to explain its case. That is important because if the values and ethos of a faith school are to mean anything, it should be that they take very seriously the need to engage with, educate, and have a mission to the poorest in our society. That should be at the heart of any faith school based on a Christian and Catholic ethos.

I shall quote from Pope Francis's Twitter feed. He said this week—rather controversially for some, although I do not know why:

“Inequality is the root of social evil.”

That was Pope Francis on his Twitter page—“@Pontifex”. Of course, he is absolutely right. The Pontiff's statement should be at the heart of the ethos of all faith schools, and particularly Catholic schools. I believe that it is at the heart of those schools, but it is important to point out the limited

examples of schools that are not following admissions procedures that meet the test of being fair. Those institutions should be held to account, whatever kind of school they are. However, it seems particularly important that a mission to educate the poorest in our society should be at the heart of a faith school's ethos.

Robert Ffello: A statistic I spotted a moment ago goes to the heart of what my hon. Friend just said: 18.4% of pupils at Catholic primary schools live in the most deprived areas, compared with 13.8% nationally. There is a huge difference between the two.

Kevin Brennan: Yes, indeed. I have looked at all the statistics in the report, some of which my hon. Friend mentioned earlier, and I have commended the Catholic Education Service for the serious effort it has made to look into the issue. If people look at the statistics, they could say that the problem, if there is one, might be elsewhere, rather than necessarily in Catholic schools. I will not pursue that any further, however, because it is not the subject of today's debate.

When a system is in place to adjudicate on the fairness of schools admissions, and when a body is in place against which those admissions should be tested, schools should take them seriously and not try to evade them. I thought it was disappointing earlier in the Parliament when the role of schools adjudicator was weakened and watered down by the Government. I put on the record the fact that we intend to strengthen the role, should we be elected at the next general election.

Mr Hoban: Given that the hon. Gentleman is talking about policy and going back to the Opposition's position prior to this Government's being elected, I should say that his right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson), when Secretary of State for Education, flirted with the idea of imposing quotas on faith schools of those who were not of the relevant faith—I think it was about 25%. Is that a policy he intends to go back to?

Kevin Brennan: No, it is not, and it will not be Labour policy. For the very reasons I have outlined, I do not think that is in any way necessary—but it is necessary that there should be fair admissions, which is the point that I am making. All schools, when they are criticised by the schools adjudicator, should not try to evade the issue. They should take it seriously and ensure that their admissions policies are meeting the criteria.

Yesterday, the former Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Mr Blunkett), issued a report for the Labour Front-Bench team. I will read a short bit from it, to put it on the record—although it is a consultation, it is essentially an outline of the position that Labour are taking regarding admissions. We said that “whilst the Office of the Schools Adjudicator...annual report noted that only 10% of Local Authorities objected to the arrangements of other admission authorities in their area, the OSA has separate evidence of much more widespread non-compliance. This review recommends that the School Admissions Code is strengthened by removing the possibility of individual schools ‘opting-out’ of the locally agreed admissions framework. This would not prevent changes to arrangements locally or agreed experimentation by Admissions Authorities, but would avoid the detrimental impact of rogue action with one school damaging the admissions of other schools in the locality. This recommendation does not interfere with the role of diocesan authorities, academies or schools as their own ‘Admissions Authority’, but reinforces the necessity of agreed and coherent arrangements within the relevant local area.”

It is important to put that statement on the record, because there are concerns about the watering down of the role of the schools adjudicator by the current Government and about the continuing disintegration and fragmentation of the school system as a result of the Government's academisation and free school policy. I commend the document to hon. Members, if they would like to read it further.

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reading out the passage from the document, and I apologise if this is just me being hard-of-understanding, but could he explain what it means in practical terms?

Kevin Brennan: Yes, I can. It means that Labour will, as we previously pledged, strengthen the role of the schools adjudicator to make sure not only that admissions arrangements are fair, but that when the schools adjudicator makes a ruling, the changes are put in place—if necessary, by the schools adjudicator. I will explain that with a further quote from the document: “It will be necessary to strengthen the OSA and re-instate its power to change admission arrangements directly on upholding an objection (rather than merely issue a ruling).”

That was a source of great contention earlier in this Parliament, when the Government removed the power of the adjudicator and effectively made it extremely difficult for parents, when they have objections to admissions arrangements, to get those changed.

Damian Hinds: To be clear, does that mean that in the case of faith schools, in the Labour party’s outline plans, the definition of practising a religion—or an element, I suppose, of practising a religion—would fall further towards the Office of the Schools Adjudicator and away from diocesan authorities?

Kevin Brennan: It need not affect in any way the essence of practising a religion, but where there are requirements—as in the case discussed earlier—for people, for example, to undertake cleaning, the Office of the Schools Adjudicator could rule that that was an unfair part of an admissions policy.

Damian Hinds: Forget bell ringing and cleaning—let us talk about late baptism for a moment. As a practical example, could the Office of the Schools Adjudicator decide that children having had a late baptism should not count, in a sense, as being Catholic in the same way as those who had infant baptisms?

Kevin Brennan: I am sufficiently well versed in Catholic theology to know that there is no distinction between Catholics, regardless of when they were baptised. Of course that would not be applicable; it would be ludicrous if that were the case.

This has been a very good debate. It is extremely important that we have an opportunity to air these subjects. I want to place on the record my support and praise for the work of Catholic schools throughout the country and to commend, as I said, the Catholic Education Service for the serious engagement that it has had with the issue in relation to admissions. I ask the Minister to respond to the questions that hon. Members have raised about the 50% rule with regard to free schools and to give an answer about why voluntary aided schools cannot be set up as quickly and easily as free schools under this Government’s policy.

Mr Hoban Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Kevin Brennan: I will, because there is a bit of extra time.

Mr Hoban: The hon. Gentleman wants to find out what the Government’s policy is. Will he elaborate on what his policy is in connection with the Labour party’s replacement for free schools? Will those schools be subject to the same cap as applies to free schools at the moment?

Kevin Brennan: I commend the document to the hon. Gentleman. I think that he will find all the answers contained therein. I shall finish my speech at that point.

The Minister for Schools (Mr David Laws): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dobbin. I join other hon. Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier) on securing the debate and my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) on taking on the mantle so well and setting out his concerns so clearly. I also join him in the comments that he made at the beginning of his speech about the tragedy that has occurred in Leeds. It is on the minds of all hon. Members. Our condolences are very much with the relatives of the teacher who died, and our thoughts are with the governors, teachers and pupils at that school.

We have had an extensive debate, with good participation from a number of hon. Members. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (John Pugh) and the hon. Members for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Ffello), for Fareham (Mr Hoban), for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) and for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) for their contributions. We have had good representation from those of the Catholic faith here today. They even seem to have got through to the Front Benches, because I also have to declare an interest, having been educated only at Catholic schools—at a Catholic state primary school and an independent Catholic secondary school. I think that I can therefore speak with a bit of knowledge and some sympathy for the points made by hon. Members.

I want to place on record the fact that the Government recognise the important contribution that the Churches and faith schools—schools of all faiths—make to our education system. About one third of the schools in England are Church or faith schools and, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire said, about 10% of all schools are Roman Catholic. These schools are usually popular with parents and include some of the highest-performing schools in the country. Catholic schools in particular generally outperform other types of state school. Last year, at primary level, 81% of pupils in Catholic schools achieved level 4 and above in reading, writing and maths at key stage 2, compared with 75% of pupils at all state schools. At secondary level, 67% of students secured five good GCSEs, including English and maths, in contrast to 61% of students at all state schools in 2013.

A number of hon. Members have commented on the composition by deprivation of pupils in Catholic schools compared with other schools. Obviously, that is a complicated issue, because the fact that there are differences between schools in their disadvantaged cohorts does not necessarily prove that there has been an attempt by schools to skew their intake in one way or the other. The underlying demographics of the area and the people who want to access the faith schools may mean that they are represented in different ways from the national average in terms of their deprivation characteristics. It is worth noting that the proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals in Roman Catholic schools are not notably different from the percentages of all pupils who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

John Pugh: The Minister has just profiled the difference between Catholic schools and other kinds of school in terms of educational achievement, but to the credit of a lot of Catholic schools, they also have very good pastoral arrangements. Has the Department any data showing, for example, the number of exclusions from Catholic schools as opposed to other sorts of school? My instinct is that they are rather better at catering for pupils who have problematic histories than normal state schools.

Mr Laws: My hon. Friend raises an interesting issue. I do not have those data to hand, but I am happy to look into the statistics that the Department has. I suspect that we probably do or could access such statistics, and I will write to my hon. Friend to let him know whether his hunch is supported by the data.

I know that the Catholic Church feels a strong sense of mission to provide a high-quality education through its schools. That stretches right back to before the Reformation, but was confirmed and strengthened more recently, following the reintroduction of Catholic bishops in 1850. Catholic schools do extend opportunities to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. As I said, it is true that Catholic schools have slightly lower proportions of pupils on free school meals, who are eligible for pupil premium funding, but at both primary and secondary levels, poorer pupils in Catholic schools are doing better than their peers nationally, resulting in smaller attainment gaps.

In 2013, 49% of pupil premium pupils in Catholic schools secured five or more A* to C grade GCSEs, including English and maths, compared with 41% of their peers nationally. That is a healthy advantage in favour of Catholic schools. It equates to an attainment gap of 24 percentage points in Catholic schools. That is lower than the national average of 27 percentage points.

Catholic schools continue to serve high numbers of children from immigrant families—as my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire said—both old and new, and from deprived communities. According to the Catholic Education Service, with which we meet and engage regularly, 30% of pupils in Catholic maintained secondary schools are from ethnic minorities, compared with 24% nationally, and 17% live in the most deprived areas, compared with 12% nationally.

My hon. Friend asked whether we had made an assessment of some of the trends in demand for Catholic schools recently. We have not made such an assessment. Obviously, there is an issue about active participation in religion, which is declining in our society, but he is right to point out that we have had an influx of immigrants from communities with strong Catholic representation abroad. That has put pressure on Catholic school places in some communities in the country.

The Education Act 1944 brought many Church schools, including from the Catholic sector, into the state education system, and we continue to benefit from that settlement today. There are nearly 2,000 Catholic schools in England, serving more than 700,000 children—more than 400,000 primary school children and about 300,000 in secondary schools. The notable involvement of the Catholic sector also extends into higher education, particularly through the teacher training colleges, such as St Mary's. There is a lot more for us to do, however, and a lot of scope for Catholic schools to play a big role in the education system. Many parents want to see more school places, particularly in parts of the country where there has been that bulge in the primary population since the increase in the birth rate in 2004. That is why the Department has allocated a total of £5 billion for local authorities between 2011 and 2015 to meet basic need.

To support the expansion of schools across the country, we have also allocated large amounts of basic-need capital beyond the existing Parliament, which will help to fund those school expansions. I urge Catholic schools to play a full part in expanding, to help us in those areas with a shortage of school places to meet basic need. I think that that will provide some of the opportunities that my hon. Friend has been seeking, but it is also, in many communities, a responsibility that those who are engaged in state education should want to meet.

Our free schools programme is also helping to meet parental demand for good local school places. Once they are full, the 173 open free schools will provide a total of around 82,000 additional places, with around 23,000 of those places at primary school level. There are two open Catholic free schools. One of those cases was not uncontroversial with the Church, and I will say something later in my speech about the potential involvement of Catholic schools in the free schools programme.

The free schools programme offers new opportunities to groups of all faiths and none to set up new schools in their community. However, faith free schools and new provision academies must be open and welcoming to the communities around them. Where the Government fund new Church or faith school provision, it is right that such new schools cater for local demand in the faith, but the needs of children in the broader local community must not be overlooked. We want all local children to have the same opportunity to access high-quality state-funded education. The fact that it is state funded is the point.

One of the fundamental principles of our education system is the idea of parental choice, something that is important not only to Liberals but to Conservatives and members of other parties. Parental choice is particularly important in the context of new Church and other faith provision. Creating new Church and faith schools gives parents who want their children to have a Church or faith education the opportunity to choose to seek a place at a Church or faith school. However, the Government and I are clear that parental choice also means that all parents should be able to exercise choice and apply to suitable state-funded schools. That includes parents of another faith or not of the faith who may choose to seek a place in their local faith school. It is vital, when we establish new academies and free schools, that we balance those two elements of parental choice. The schools must be set up to serve the needs of the wider community, not simply the faith need. That is why we pledged in the coalition agreement to ensure that all new academies follow an inclusive admissions policy. We followed that up by saying that we wanted to ensure that at least 50% of places in new provision free schools and academies with a religious designation are not allocated on the basis of faith but are accessible by the local community to children who are of the faith, of a different faith or of none.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I apologise for being delayed because of other commitments. I had two sons at the London Oratory school, and I never knew why Tony Blair drew up the ladder after him and stopped the school interviewing. The school made every effort to make its intake very socially diverse, and it was. The Minister says that he went to an independent Catholic school. Why can we not simply let independent schools do what independent schools do, and give

them freedom of admission? Of course they will try to create a socially diverse system. They will admit who they want. Why do we have to tie their hands?

Mr Laws: I am coming directly to that point. I think that there is a significant difference between schools funded by taxpayers, who have the right to access schools that are, in many cases, their local schools; and schools chosen by parents who seek paid-for private education. I will go on to explain how the 50% works in practice, because it is not quite as some hon. Members have described. The Government are taking forward the principle that was in place under the academy provision created by the previous Government, so there is consistency between the 50% approach that we have taken and the previous situation. The 50% cap represents a balance between providing places for parents who want their children to be educated in line with their faith, and preserving the inclusive, broad local community focus of the school so that local parents, who may not be of that faith, can exercise their choice over state-funded schooling.

We have no reason to believe that the balance is not working effectively. Proposer groups, representing many different faiths and none, still come forward and are keen to set up free schools. Those schools are proving popular with parents. The 50% limit on faith admissions does not mean that Catholic children must be turned away once the school has reached the 50% threshold. A faith free school may end up recruiting more than 50% of pupils who share its faith as long as no more than half the places were allocated on the basis of faith. Other Catholic children have the same opportunity as all other applicants to access the remaining 50% of places, which are allocated according to the other over-subscription criteria.

We do not believe that a 50% limit on faith admissions is incompatible with the provision of high-quality faith education. Church and other faith free schools have the freedom to deliver religious education and collective worship according to the tenets of their faith and to appoint teaching staff and leaders by reference to faith. Not all Church and faith schools, even those with a faith priority in their admission arrangements, admit only children of their faith. If a faith school is under-subscribed, the school must admit all children who apply, regardless of their faith.

Many Church and faith schools choose not to adopt faith-based admission arrangements. The Catholic Education Service's data show that the average proportion of Catholic pupils in its maintained schools is 70%, and its independent schools have an even larger proportion of non-Catholic pupils. I have been looking during the debate at the percentage of Catholic pupils in Catholic schools, which ranges from 72.8% of Catholic pupils in Catholic primary schools to 42.6% of Catholic pupils in Catholic sixth-form colleges. In the independent sector, only 36.4% of pupils in Catholic schools are Catholic. Only 5% of maintained Catholic schools and colleges—100 institutions—have entirely Catholic pupils, and 20% of Catholic schools, or 401, are already operating with half of their student body composed of non-Catholic children.

I do not believe, however—I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire agrees—that the 95% of schools that do not have a fully Catholic population are not providing a high-quality Catholic education for all their pupils. Indeed, the attainment levels of Catholic schools bear that out. Many of us who have been in Catholic schools know that a school can have a large proportion of non-Catholic pupils and still maintain its faith principles. The Government and I are clear that that is one of the conditions under which non-Catholic or non-faith pupils enter Catholic or faith schools.

Damian Hinds: Does not what the Minister sets out raise an obvious question? If such diversity already exists, and if large numbers—30%—of pupils at Catholic schools are non-Catholic, why is there a need to impose a cap? Such a cap would come into play in places where there is a large Catholic population over a slightly wider area. Children would not be turned away for being Catholic but, inevitably, other children who happened to live a little closer to the school would be preferred in their place.

Mr Laws: There are two separate points. I sought to make the first point by addressing the question that my hon. Friend raised in his speech about whether it was possible to have a Catholic ethos and education in a school in which a large number of pupils were not Catholic. If he agrees that it is

possible to retain that ethos, I welcome that. I come back to the issue of there being two competing rights in a state-funded school system: people's right to choose to have their children educated in the way that they wish, and the right of taxpayers who live near state-funded schools to have some ability to access them despite the over-representation of people from the faith that the system allows.

Kevin Brennan: Will the Minister clarify the Government's position on new voluntary-aided schools?

Mr Laws: I am coming to that, and I hope I will be able to get to it before the end of my speech. As a Catholic—this is a personal comment and not one that I make on behalf of the Government—I think that our faith is at its best when it reaches out to people beyond the faith, and I urge the Catholic faith in this country not to think of itself as providing schools to serve only people of the Catholic faith. Surely, in a society where all religions seem to be struggling to keep people engaged, faiths such as Catholicism should welcome the fact that many parents want their children to attend those schools even if they are not of the faith. I acknowledge that that is an issue for Catholic schools and the Catholic faith; it is not for me, but I think it should be considered.

Although I recognise that the Catholic sector has aspirations whereby it continues to have objections to our policy on admissions in faith free schools, I am keen that that the Catholic Education Service should continue to engage with us in discussing the matter. We remain committed to continuing our engagement with the Catholic Education Service on this issue, and we would welcome innovative ideas from it. For example, a free school that, in response to local demand, met the anticipated faith demand but had a capacity greater than that demand and thus did not exceed the 50% limit would still be eligible for funding. Such a school would help to provide additional school places where they are most needed and extend school choice to parents who might not be Catholic but nevertheless want a Church education for their children. I must be clear, however, that we currently have no plans to change the 50% limit. Given the fact that we have a very small number of Catholic free schools, I hope that Catholic schools will consider engaging further in that programme.

In understanding the importance of the 50% limit in ensuring that new provision Church and faith schools are also accessible to their local community, it is vital that we recognise the wider pressures on the schools system. Making sure there are enough high-quality school places for the growing population will remain one of the Government's top priorities. The Department has allocated a total of £5 billion of basic-need money to local authorities between 2011-12 and 2014-15. That is considerably in excess of the amount for the previous Parliament. Local authorities and other schools in those areas have already created about a third of a million additional school places, and must continue to create such places in future.

The Department provides funding to enable local authorities to meet the demand for new places based on authorities' forecasts of pupil numbers in their areas. The Government welcome Church and faith schools as part of the diverse and autonomous pattern of education provision in this country. We therefore provide for faith designation of both maintained schools and academies. A voluntary-aided school can seek to convert to academy status, just like any other maintained school, but a voluntary-aided school converting to academy status would convert under existing arrangements—