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CABINET

COMPREHENSIVE SECONDARY EDUCATION

MEMORANDUM BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR
EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

General policy

The Government's Election Manifesto stated "Labour will get rid of the segregation of children caused by 11-plus selection; secondary education will be reorganised on comprehensive lines". The reasons for this policy, and for beginning to carry it out without delay, can be summarised as follows:

- (i) The fallibility of all the methods used in the attempt to assess the potential capacities of children when they are 10½ years old.
- (ii) The wide local variations in the standard of attainment required of children of this age as a condition of entry to a grammar school.
- (iii) Though some secondary modern schools have developed well, others cannot offer the longer and more academic courses of study for which many of their pupils are suited.
- (iv) The present separatist system tends to divide society by preventing mutual understanding between those with greater and less academic attainment.
- (v) Primary schools in many areas are tempted to concentrate on getting pupils through the 11-plus tests where these still exist.
- (vi) In the last two or three years many local education authorities—68 out of 148 is the most recent figure—have been introducing or devising schemes of reorganisation which aim at getting rid of the 11-plus. Most of these schemes relate to part only of an area and/or only to county (as opposed to voluntary—Church) schools. Some of these schemes are admirable, some ill-advised. It is now time to give a national lead, indicating the principles to be observed and the kind of problems likely to arise in different areas when reorganisation is planned.

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2. Possible methods

Comprehensive education may be achieved by a variety of methods. Some of these have been tried, others are yet to be introduced. To some extent different methods reflect genuine differences in objectives, but in the main they reflect the inescapable fact that any new organisation has got to fit into the existing stock of school buildings. This has been designed very largely for the separatist system. The total number of secondary schools is 5,891. Since the war 3,383 new schools have been built or are in announced programmes—for two-thirds of the secondary population new places have been or are in process of being provided. The rate at which the stock of schools can be replaced is very slow and there is no prospect for many years to come of establishing large numbers of comprehensive schools in purpose designed buildings.

The main possible patterns of comprehensive organisation are:

- (i) Comprehensive schools which children enter at the age of 11, and in which they stay throughout their school life. It was previously argued that if such a school were to produce a Sixth Form of adequate size, its total size must be excessive. This argument has been weakened because of the growing proportion of children in all schools who stay on into the Sixth Form. In many areas a good school of this type need not contain more than about 1,000 pupils. Some comprehensive schools contain 1,500 or 2,000 pupils, and there are some who take the view that there are positive advantages in such a size. But, however this may be, there is no need to make the school as large as this in order to enable it to be a good comprehensive school.
- (ii) The division of a school, such as that described in (i), into junior and senior departments, in different buildings.
- (iii) An arrangement whereby children, on leaving primary school, enter a "junior high school" which is comprehensive in its range of studies. At the age of 13 or 14 they either continue in that school or, if their parents wish, and are prepared to keep them at school till they are at least 16, they go on to a "grammar school" for the rest of their school life. This "grammar school" will provide a wider range of studies than that name usually implies, since it must meet the needs of all pupils whose parents wish them to go. If, in time, a very large proportion of parents do so wish, this system will become very like that described in (ii). This pattern and (iv) below must be regarded as temporary second best arrangements since they involve some measure of segregation. While they exist it is essential that transfer to the "grammar" school should be on parents' choice alone.
- (iv) Other two-tier systems. In these all the pupils, on leaving primary school, transfer to a junior comprehensive school. At the age of 13 or 14 all the pupils have a choice

of senior school: one catering for those who expect to stay at school substantially beyond the compulsory age and the other catering for those who do not.

- (v) Comprehensive schools for the age-range 11-16, followed by "junior colleges" for pupils over 16.

The common feature of all these methods is that they make it unnecessary to separate children into different schools on the basis of an "11 plus" judgment. The main difference is that (i) can usually only be adopted where new schools, planned as comprehensives from the start, are to be built; (ii), (iii), (iv) and (v) make reorganisation possible in existing buildings. To rely on (i) alone would be to postpone reorganisation for a very long time.

3. Objections of principle

Four major objections will be raised by opponents of our policy:

- (i) That it means "destroying the grammar schools". In my view, the essence of a grammar school is that it provides that kind of academic education which we now call "grammar" education. It does not cease to do this when it widens its range of studies to meet the needs of pupils now excluded by the "11 plus": indeed, since many of those pupils will in fact prove capable of following "grammar" courses of study, it will do its present job for a larger number of pupils. Our opponents appear to take the view that a grammar school cannot be a grammar school unless it provides grammar education *only*, and provides it only for pupils selected by the 11 plus: they are, in fact, defining a school, not by virtue of what it does do, but by virtue of what it does not do.
- (ii) That, whatever the merits of comprehensive secondary education, each local authority should be left to choose for itself between comprehensive and separatist systems. The 1944 Education Act does not prescribe either system. Most of the country, after the war, developed on separatist lines without much consideration of merits, partly because it was administratively easiest, partly because it involved the least change from the past and partly because much educational opinion at the time favoured separatism. In theory, local authorities were legally free to "go comprehensive"; in practice, this often involved steps (closure or enlargement of particular schools) which required Ministerial consent. There were also various administrative obstacles which the Ministry could erect in the path of a local authority which desired a comprehensive system. The Labour Government of 1945-51 was not friendly to comprehensive reorganisation. Since then, the hostility of Conservative Governments, at first emphatic, has later been mitigated but not removed: the Conservative Party cannot claim, on its record, to have been champions of local autonomy in this field. Nevertheless, a positive decision that local

authorities ought to "go comprehensive" is a new departure. I believe it to be justified by the general arguments in the first section of this paper. Further, people tend to move from one part of the country to another more than they did in the past, and this tendency will increase: it is a duty of the central Government, in the interests of the children, to see that local divergences in education are not too great. It would be neither possible nor desirable to impose one method or one time-table on all authorities; but I believe it to be right to *require* them to commence the reorganisation, giving as much local flexibility as is consistent with carrying out the policy in our Manifesto. While many authorities will go comprehensive willingly, others will not, and there will be controversy about the principle of imposition of a central Government policy on local authorities. This may be a contentious issue.

(iii) The establishment of comprehensive schools can mean the establishment of neighbourhood schools. It is inevitable that schools serving different kinds of areas will vary in quality and public esteem. Those in neighbourhoods where a higher proportion of homes give children encouragement and a cultural background will normally be better schools than those in neighbourhoods where social conditions are poor. In theory it would be possible to compel parents living in Hampstead to send their children to school in, say, Hackney and *vice versa*. In practice this would involve so drastic an attack on the rights of parents to choose the best and most accessible school which has room for their children that it is not practical politics. The best answers that we can give to the neighbourhood school argument are that the present system enables only the grammar school child to escape from a poor background and that the fundamental job is to eliminate the poor social conditions altogether.

(iv) Some educational opinion and some local education authorities continue to believe that separate grammar and modern schools give a better education to all children. The academic child benefits by being in a school which concentrates on intellectual achievement, which sets high standards of work and attainment and in which the efforts of highly specialist academic teachers are devoted entirely to the kind of pupils they are best suited to deal with. In the modern schools the children of middling ability are not discouraged by the presence of those of first class ability. They have a chance to gain a sense of achievement and often blossom into success in various directions which they might never do in a school which included the most able. Similarly in modern schools which can be much smaller than comprehensive schools the least able and the most difficult children—those with very poor home backgrounds—can have the benefit of direct personal supervision by teachers in a community which does not overwhelm them by its size. These are genuinely held

beliefs, but they cannot be proved right. Our answer must be that the advantages of separate schools need not be lost in comprehensive schools provided these are properly staffed and organised.

There is a point about going comprehensive which is likely to be raised by some teachers rather than our opponents. The elimination of separate schools must mean a loss of headships and may seem to affect adversely the career prospects of non-graduate teachers who will have to compete with graduates for posts of special responsibility. We shall have to watch this point in the context of the system of teachers' pay.

4. Particular difficulties

To judge from the tenor of the debate on 27th November and from Questions subsequently placed on the Order Paper, opposition is now shifting from general principle to the particular difficulties and problems that will beset reorganisation, *e.g.*:

- (i) Consultation with teachers and explanation to parents are essential to the preparation of any sound scheme of reorganisation.
- (ii) A comprehensive school can sometimes be located in a group of buildings which were previously separate schools: but the soundness of this must depend on local geography, transport, mobility of staff, etc.
- (iii) Local authority building programmes up to the middle of 1967-68 have already been authorised. Local authorities could not be required to go back on commitments they have already entered into for the building of particular schools in these programmes. This limits the extent to which these programmes could be altered to make them more suitable to a policy of reorganisation.
- (iv) A number of local authorities provide for grammar education, partly by paying for places in the 179 Direct Grant Schools. Some 100,000 pupils (forming 3 per cent of the total secondary school population) attend these schools, of whom 60 per cent have their fees paid by local education authorities. Some of these schools might be willing to broaden their basis of entry and no longer restrict themselves to pupils competitively selected at the age of 10½; others, perhaps notably the Roman Catholics, might be willing to give up Direct Grant status and enter the local authority system. The majority, however, would not pursue either of these courses. In so far, therefore, as local authorities continued to take up Direct Grant places, some element of 11-plus selection would remain, at any rate for some time to come. In so far as they cease to do so, many schools would need to seek my approval to an increase in fees, and this would be a question I would then need to consider. For the present, I should pursue a policy of not permitting any increase in the number of Direct Grant Schools: in longer term I believe these schools should either come within the local

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authority system or be included in the proposals which I shall later be making for dealing with independent schools.

- (v) Voluntary schools—denominational. Some 245,000 pupils, representing about 9 per cent of the secondary school population in maintained schools, attend Church of England and Roman Catholic schools: the numbers are not evenly distributed over the country and in some areas the proportion of children in denominational schools is very high. When a local authority, in addition to the other problems of reorganisation, has to ensure that the existing rights of the Churches, and of parents, are not disregarded, the problem is correspondingly more complicated. From recent conversation with leading figures in the Anglican, Non-conformist and Roman Catholic Churches, I learn that they have certainly no hostility to comprehensive reorganisation as such, but that they would expect their claims to be given at least as much consideration as any of the other problems besetting reorganisation.
- (vi) Voluntary schools—non-denominational. There are about 250 voluntary secondary schools which are not of religious foundation. This category includes many of the best known and most highly esteemed grammar schools—for example, in London there are among others:

Camden School for Girls—Frances Mary Buss Foundation

Colfes Grammar School for Boys—Leathersellers Company

Mary Datchelor Girls—Clothworkers Company

Dame Alice Owen's Girls and Boys—Brewers Company

Central Foundation Girls and Boys—Central Foundation

William Ellis Boys

It may prove impossible to persuade the Governors of schools of this kind to agree to absorption in a comprehensive system and there will be public protests whenever we attempt to force the issue.

These difficulties are considerable and it will be the tactic of the Opposition to magnify them in the hope of permanently obstructing comprehensive reorganisation without committing themselves to an out-and-out defence of separatism and the 11 plus—an attitude which is becoming increasingly unpopular. I cannot accept the view that these difficulties are insuperable: to do so would be to say that we are saddled for ever with the 11 plus, whatever its demerits.

It is of the nature of these difficulties that there is no one general answer to them. They have to be dealt with by scrutiny of each local authority's plan for reorganisation. In some areas these difficulties are absent, or slight; in others we must accept that reorganisation

can only proceed slowly. The complete establishment of comprehensive secondary organisation will take a considerable time. I believe, however, that in five years such progress could be made that the comprehensive system would be accepted as the normal pattern, towards which all local authorities were working, though necessarily at different speeds. To take an analogy from the past: it has been the law for 20 years past to conduct primary and secondary education in different schools, but the last of the "all-age" schools have not yet quite disappeared.

5. How to proceed

In the light of all these considerations I believe that my next step should be to issue as soon as possible a circular to local education authorities; and that this should be followed by legislation in the next Session. The circular would call on local authorities to submit plans for the reorganisation of their secondary schools on comprehensive lines. It would draw their attention to the matters mentioned in Sections 2 and 4 of this paper. It would lay equal emphasis on the Government's desire for genuine reorganisation and on the Government's recognition of the need for considerable variation both in method and timing, and it would include guidance on general principles. Later on it may be possible to say that financial help will be given to help authorities surmount some of the particular difficulties: but I recognise that this cannot be said at present. I expect that the replies of local authorities would vary: there will be enthusiasm; moderate enthusiasm; cautious acceptance; reluctant acceptance; delaying tactics; and, perhaps, in a few cases, outright refusal.

In my view, legislation is needed both to prevent absolute refusal by some local authorities and to satisfy all authorities that this is firmly and permanently national policy. I think that absolute refusal would be rare; but if there were no mention of legislation many authorities would delay action in the hope of a change of policy and a few awkward authorities might be encouraged not only to refuse themselves, but to try to recruit supporters among authorities who would otherwise be willing to co-operate.

The legislation should (1) make clear that the "national policy" referred to in the 1944 Act includes (as far as the secondary stage is concerned) the comprehensive principle, (2) make such detailed alterations in that Act—*e.g.*, Section 13—as follow from (1). It would not need to be a long Bill but it would—unavoidably—be controversial.

Meanwhile, the Opposition have selected this subject for a Supply debate on 21st January. I ask my colleagues to agree:

- (i) That, when speaking in this debate, I should present the argument set out in this paper.
- (ii) That I should issue a circular as described in paragraph 5.

M. S.

*Department of Education and Science,
14th January, 1965.*



