



NOT A CONSEQUENCE-FREE DECISION: A deal has been reached to create a single testing system for post-primary transfer

Reducing grammar sector would help break selection stalemate

LAST week's announcement that a deal had been agreed amongst grammar schools to create a single testing system for post-primary transfer will not have come as a surprise.

The existence of two separate privately run tests, set up in place of the old 11-plus, had always rankled with many parents. The system meant they faced the choice of picking one test, restricting their children's options to schools predominantly from one sector, or opting for both in the knowledge that it would mean compelling their children to sit tests across four Saturdays.

This decision will mean children who sit the two new tests from 2023 will be able to consider applying to all grammar schools. It represents a return to how things were before the old Eleven Plus was decommissioned amidst much misplaced fanfare.

The tests are only required due to the continued operation of a means of primary to post-primary transfer which has long been abandoned in most other societies.

Retaining academic selection is not a consequence-free decision. The evidence has been clear for a very long time that the price of preserving the grammar sector in its current form is a long tail of academic underachievement, which continues to have a profound and enduring impact upon our economy and society at large.

Northern Ireland's population share of individuals holding only basic or no qualifications vastly exceeds that of the Republic and is one of the worst performers when compared to regions across Britain. The proportion of young people holding degrees or post-secondary qualifications is also significantly higher in the Republic than in the north.

Fear is the pre-eminent factor contributing towards the preservation of our archaic education system.

It is the job of every parent to act in the best interests of their children, so it is only to be expected that, in a system which separates children at age eleven, parents will be motivated by a desire to secure a place at a school perceived to provide the best opportunities and prospects for their children to succeed.

A fear of children being left only

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with the option of places in a school with a disproportionately high number of pupils with academic, behavioural, social or emotional difficulties motivates parents to ensure their children are best positioned to navigate a way through the transfer process in order to claim a place in grammar schools defined by significant under representation of children from the aforementioned categories.

The grammar sector is where the lion's share of children from more affluent backgrounds will be educated. When the more than 190 post-primary schools in Northern Ireland are ranked in terms of the percentage of children enrolled who are entitled to free school meals, only a couple of grammar schools feature in the top 100 schools (this in spite of grammars constituting one third of all post-primary schools).

The most significant obstacle facing those wishing to change our system is that it produces the optimal outcome for those in society wielding the greatest influence and capable of making the most noise. The grammar sector in the north of Ireland provides us with all the benefits of private schools in Dublin, London or large American

cities without the sting of the annual fees.

We have wonderful school communities across every sector with dedicated and inspiring leaders and teachers who make it their life's mission to deliver for the children they have the privilege to share classrooms with through the formative years of their young lives. Whilst it's true that no playing field will ever be truly level when it comes to education systems, ours stands apart as being particularly uneven due to selection.

The popularity of academic selection shows no sign of abating here, and the political veto wielded by unionist politicians means it is unlikely to be abandoned any time soon.

Short of abolishing academic selection and replacing it with a system of transfer based on catchment schools and geography, a third way must be found which can provide much needed support to the non-grammar sector and break the stalemate which has existed for generations.

It is within the gift of the education minister to reduce the size of our grammar sector, a step which would significantly enhance enrolment levels at non-grammar schools, with obvious benefits for sustainability due to the increased pupil numbers and budgets. More importantly, such a move would provide these schools with a cohort of higher ability pupils helping to positively influence and shape school culture, morale and peer aspirations.

No supporter of academic selection could credibly argue against a significant streamlining of the grammar sector. There was a time when grammar schools accounted for approximately one quarter of children.

Today, more than 40 per cent of post-primary children will attend grammar schools.

Whilst last week's announcement will be good news for many children and hopefully lessen test-related anxieties in November to come, the issue of whether or not children sit tests on one, two, three or four Saturdays in late Autumn each year is but a distraction from the substantive challenges we must address in order to finally develop an education system genuinely constructed with the interests and outcomes of all children equally in mind.

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ON THIS DAY

SEPTEMBER 27 1921

'B Men' Return

FOLLOWING the announcement made by Sir James Craig in the Northern Parliament on Monday, the B Specials were again on duty in various parts of the city last night. They were accompanied by regular members of the RIC.

The Dublin Evening Telegraph comments: When the Truce was declared [on 11 July 1921] the whole-time Specials were ordered to be kept to civil police duties and the B Class or part-time Specials were for a time disbanded. These measures were deemed necessary in the interest of public peace. ... The remobilisation of the force where the latest pogrom is in full swing is a flagrant breach of the Truce. ... The British Government organised a partisan 'police', armed and paid them and virtually placed the lives and property of the Catholic minority in Ulster at their mercy. Under the Truce these Orange mercenaries were to be kept in leash. They are once again to be loosed upon the population.

Military Communique

THE following official communique was issued from [Military] HQ Belfast last night: At 5 p.m. it was reported that Catholic families in Beersbridge Road were ordered to leave their houses. Police protection was afforded them. At 5.15 p.m. two Protestant workmen were assaulted by a number of women near Smithfield and were forced to leave their work.

At 7.30 p.m. a report was received that Catholic families were being driven from their homes in Douglas, Belmont and Willowfield Streets. ... At about 10 p.m. a Protestant was assaulted at the junction of Lancaster and York Street.

Looting in Belfast

A SPIRIT grocery, the property of Mr Hugh O'Neill, Tennant Street, which had been previously looted, was reopened about six o'clock yesterday evening. A couple of hours later a mob assembled and completely wrecked the place, carrying off all the stock and everything else they could lay their hands on.

Numbers of individuals styling themselves the 'Belfast Watch Committee' visited shopkeepers in the centre of the city and ordered them to put up notices in their premises against selling any goods manufactured in Ireland outside North-East Ulster. A large poster, printed in red ink, in the following terms: 'This shop is owned by a Catholic and Sinn Féin' was pasted up on the outside of business premises owned by Catholics but immediately taken down by the owners. (The return of the B Specials on the streets was deplored by the nationalist population which regarded them 'with the same hostility that the Black and Tans had inspired in the South'. Suspended from duty under the July Truce, they were seen by Craig as the guardians of the Unionist state.)

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