**NORTHERN IRELAND IS NOT WORKING**

The decision by the Sinn Fein Minister, John O’Dowd, to abandon his Education and Skills Authority Bill and revert to the five Education Boards has gone remarkably under-analysed. He blames the DUP for finding more reasons to block the Bill - after an initial agreement. Some difficulties were said to relate to voluntary grammar schools. I suspect there are more fundamental reasons about which we are not being told, perhaps involving a fight back by the doomed CCMS.

This was a body which was to be have been subsumed into the new central authority or ESA and would have largely lost its fingertip control over the Catholic schools. The UUP majored on the stalinoid centralisation that ESA involved in a vigorous campaign of opposition led by Danny Kinahan of the UUP. He could be said to have won a major victory as he effectively marshalled so much of the education and teaching world in opposition.

The Transferor Representatives’ Council (TRC), representing the Presbyterian, Methodist and Church of Ireland Boards of Education did welcome the establishment of a single Education and Skills Authority once a sectoral body for controlled schools was added. However state schools especially non-grammar secondary remain largely unprotected lacking effective non-religious advocates.

The only winners are the 500 people from the Educations Boards who have received healthy redundancy packages and who may well be offered their jobs back. Money is little or no object in the Northern Ireland public sector which also has pay rates 50% higher than the private sector (70% for women), creating a labour aristocracy, but that is a subject for another day.

The losers were the taxpayers who coughed up nearly £20 million for nothing. And the political process which was proven yet again to be immobile because of the structural flaw in the Belfast Agreement. This stems from the very structure of consociationalism, a system which enables both communities to follow their own pursuits but provides no arrangement whereby disputes can be resolved.

This applies particularly to ethnic issues like Parades and the Past (the re-running of the IRA war in law terms) but also, as it has turned out, to more mundane questions like education administration. The only threat the system imposes to bring about compromise is self-destruction – unlikely to happen with our current two incumbents. The result is the need to reach out to the US for pressure to be applied back-in.

Stormont can spend the money but it can’t reform or change anything unless there is a sectarian carve-up which favours the two major parties equally – like RPA and local government reform. In this case the DUP have abandoned Belfast to maintain a fiefdom in the new extended Castlereagh. They have even seized the rates-rich Forestside shopping centre and transported it to Lisburn while Belfast is needlessly greened. All its contiguous suburbs should be within Belfast city’s boundaries to create a proper mix of people and to enhance its rates income.

The ESA Bill was to be the vehicle for one major social change and that was the abolition of the teacher exception in fair employment law. The UUP’s motion in the Assembly last year on the matter was surprisingly agreed by all parties except the SDLP. If repeal had been attached to the Bill in the form of an amendment, it would have started the process of enabling shared education at its most basic, which requires permitting a mixed teaching staff in Catholic schools. This mixing is something increasingly the norm in state schools but not in the maintained CCMS sector. As ethnic minorities now form an increasing portion of pupil enrolment without abolition, it is a fact that non-Christian teachers have no employment protection.

There is a mammoth chill factor against Protestants applying even to secondary schools where the certificate in religious education is not a pre-requisite. That certificate which should be taught in Stranmillis remains a necessity for candidates in Catholic primary schools. An end to the exception is the psychological *sine qua non* for shared schooling.

So in effect nothing changes in Northern Ireland, legislatively. Nothing works. Reforms die on the vine. Nothing advances except through the courts.

It is just like the 1950s Stormont. Single party majoritarianism has been replaced by two-party majoritarianism where each has a veto. One party requires agreement from a military caucus the other from a church, although that is in decline being replaced by a Leninist core of democratic centralists. This impasse of mutual veto will ultimately bring about the system’s collapse while the same two communal parties remain dominant and in power.

**Jeffrey Dudgeon (UUP candidate for Balmoral DEA)**

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