

My Lords,

Education is bundled with justice and health as a subject for debate in today's response to the Queen's speech. Education did not figure directly in Her Majesty's remarks so I hope your Lordships will be patient with me as I make a short contribution to today's debate on that subject. The proceedings of this parliament were front-loaded with two Education Bills, subsequently enacted, which we have now had a little time to see being played out across the land. Events in Birmingham have been constantly in the news and this very day significant judgements are being cast by Ofsted on the result of their inspections there. Whilst I've enjoyed the soap opera dimensions of what's been happening and find myself intrigued by the little spat between the Secretary of State for Education and the Home Secretary, I'm more than happy to let such weighty figures work out their differences as best they can. They must understand, of course, that I'm happy to put my long experience of mediation and marriage counselling at their service if they feel they require it. But my contribution to this debate must be focused on what the Birmingham mess tells us about the legislation we so recently put on the statute book.

It was my contention during the passing of those bills that we were creating a system where more and more was going to depend on two key groups of players – headteachers and governors. My contribution today, as during those debates, is on the subject of governors. I have myself been a governor, in the secondary and higher education sectors, for over thirty years. I've served in the governance of voluntary aided, totally maintained and independent schools, in rural, suburban and inner city settings. I am currently chair of trustees of The Central Foundation Schools for Boys in Islington and for Girls in Tower Hamlets. 85% of the pupils at the Girls' School are Moslems and wear the hijab to school. Throughout my years of working as a governor, I've been fortunate to work with people who've given themselves unstintingly to their responsibilities. They have brought their skills and experience and given a great deal of time to serving the best interests of their schools. All, of course, have been and are volunteers. Over the years we've collaborated with officers from various Local Authorities. Not all our experience of Local Authority involvement has been good. Indeed, some has been a downright nuisance. But the idea of bringing people with local training and expertise into the governance mix was philosophically and experientially absolutely correct and, in my judgement, necessary. We volunteers were able to test out our ideas on people who could help us with them and we were certainly rescued from some of our wayward thinking from time to time. The systematic sidelining of Local Authorities in the

legislation we have passed is an act of crude asset-stripping more worthy of a City takeover than a development in our educational provision. It leaves good-hearted and self-sacrificing volunteer governors virtually in charge of multi-million pound businesses. And this imposes significant extra pressure on them as they are driven to find more time to attend the latest briefings, study days, committees and symposia just to keep their competency up-to-date. With all the good will in the world, it's not difficult to envisage the moment when potential governors will be deterred from offering their services, daunted at the amount of time and energy it will involve. A noble British system might well be in danger of collapse.

With so much now depending on governors, governors bereft of the presence or accessibility of locally informed experts, the possibility of inefficiency, wrong decisions, uncritical acceptance of proposals put forward by headteachers are not difficult to imagine. Much worse, of course, is the possibility of using the present governance model for partisan or sectarian (or even illegal) activity. Take the case of the Park View school, at the very centre of what's been happening in Birmingham. As recently as 2012, it was considered as an outstanding school, so much so that the trust running it was expanded to operate two other schools as well. This was held up as a triumph for the Secretary of State's academy programme. Now, of course, things are being viewed quite differently. As one newspaper put it in a particularly pungent editorial: "Mr Gove's particular problem, as the architect of the rapid expansion of academy status, is that the independence he regards as its great strength turns out to be a weakness too." Quite so! The legislation we passed has, as we pointed out at the time, given the Secretary of State direct responsibility for over half of English secondary schools. And all this without an adequate process for testing their capacity or governance.

Infiltrating the governors with people holding particular or partisan or sectarian views has been colourfully described as a Trojan horse. In my view, the real Trojan horse has been provided by this parliament in those two pieces of legislation that have allowed such possibilities to occur.