

The Chilver Report: unity and diversity

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This is a study of the abortive attempt by the direct rule Conservative government in the early 1980s to impose unity on the diversity of initial teacher education (ITE) provision in Northern Ireland (NI) through the work of the NI Higher Education Review Group, chaired by Sir Henry Chilver. Harnessing hitherto untapped archives, it shows how government was forced to bow to the divergent views and religious interests of Northern Ireland society. This *realpolitik* was to produce a much less radical shake-up of ITE activity while leaving the Catholic sector essentially intact. The paper demonstrates the relevance of historical factors, the risks inherent in the failure to establish representative review bodies and the power and political adroitness of the Catholic Church at a critical juncture. The authors conclude that, in the political and social context of the 1980s, Chilver represented 'a bridge too far'.

Will the first decade of the twenty-first century prove to be a time of change for the organisation of initial teacher education, north and south? Is there perhaps an opportunity to create greater unity out of the present diversity* of provision? Certainly, in relation to the Dublin area (i.e. the Republic of Ireland) and to Northern Ireland, this issue is currently the subject of active debate. What lessons then, if any, can be drawn from the recent history of Northern Ireland, particularly from the partially unsuccessful effort by a Conservative direct rule government in the early 1980s to rationalise initial teacher education provision? This was attempted largely through the work of the Northern Ireland Higher Education Review Group, chaired by Sir Henry Chilver. While official government records relating to the period remain embargoed for up to another decade and an insight into the thinking of successive direct rule ministers and their civil servants is therefore not yet possible, this paper draws on the significant archives of both St. Mary's and Stranmillis University Colleges on the Chilver story as well as newspaper and oral material.

Even before the 'Chilver crisis' erupted, however, teacher education policy in Northern Ireland had always been a contentious issue, as writers such as Donald Akenson (Akenson, 1973), Sean Farren (Farren, 1995), Neil Fleming (Fleming, 2001) and, most recently, Stewart Roulston and John Dallat (Roulston & Dallat, 2001) have pointed out. The famous 'Battle of Stranmillis', as the then Minister of

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Education, Viscount Charlemont, described the struggle between the United Education Committee (UEC) of the main Protestant churches and the Orange Order and Sir James Craig's Unionist government during 1928–33, over the disputed question of Protestant Church representation on the management board of Stranmillis College, is perhaps the best-known example of this. Roulston and Dallat's recent study, drawing on Cabinet papers unavailable to earlier researchers, shows how by March 1932 the Craigavon government, faced with an intensive UEC campaign, the danger of political fragmentation within the Unionist *bloc* and the triumph of the Unionist *bête-noir* de Valera in the South, capitulated. The resulting 'Protestant victory', allocating three seats on the new nine-strong Stranmillis Committee of Management to the main Protestant churches, paralleled the success of the UEC in relation to 'transferred schools' under the 1930 Education Act. An interesting precedent of Government teacher education policy in Northern Ireland being determined by a well organised campaign of resistance to unpopular measures had been set. As Roulston and Dallat (2001, p. 358) conclude, 'Craig engineered fundamental modifications to educational reform for reasons of political expediency at key times in the early history of Northern Ireland'. Craig's direct rule successors in the early 1980s might well have pondered this with some profit, although it is perhaps somewhat unreasonable to have expected them to have had a well-developed knowledge of the history of education in Northern Ireland.

They might also have borne in mind the lessons to be learned from the early history of Stranmillis College after its foundation in 1922, not to mention the related exchanges between the Catholic Church authorities and the Craig government on the issue of teacher education provision for Catholic male students in the same years. As Beale and Phoenix (1998), and also Fleming (2001), have shown, Stranmillis College was far from being the proverbial 'Protestant College for the Protestant people', either in terms of the vision of its chief political architect, the seventh Marquess of Londonderry, Northern Ireland's liberal first Minister of Education, or in reality in terms of its students. A supporter of a secularised and integrated educational system at all levels, Londonderry's new training college initially lived up to its founder's vision, with 50 applications from Catholics recorded in 1923 (Fleming, 2001, p. 39). Beale and Phoenix (1998, p. 9) record an actual enrolment of 25 out of 42 first year male students in 1923–24 and in 1924–25 a total enrolment of 32 Catholic students out of a male student population of 72. This situation reflected the fact that a Catholic women's college, St. Mary's, founded in West Belfast by the Dominican Order in 1900, had secured Government support in 1923, but no similar local provision existed for Catholic men, who had trained in Dublin pre-partition. The Catholic male presence at Stranmillis was not sustained, however, in the face of the Northern Bishops' insistence that the State should fund a separate Northern Ireland college for Catholic men. The hierarchy made it clear that Catholic men trained at Stranmillis would not be employed in their schools.

The Ministry responded by proposing to support the training of male students at St. Mary's College, Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, presumably as a cheaper alternative to funding a second Catholic college. The Strawberry Hill proposal was

accepted by the bishops, under Cardinal O'Donnell, in 1925. The Church had not conceded on the basic principle of separate education in a Catholic context for those who would be instrumental in moulding young minds, while this 'British' solution no doubt had some appeal for Unionists (Fleming, 2001, p. 39). However, it is hard to disagree with Fleming's conclusion that overall the episode represented one of several defeats in the 1920s for Londonderry's vision of a secular, integrated educational system. The centrality of denominationalism in education in Northern Ireland was of course further reinforced by the debates over the 1947 Education Act and confirmed again by the negotiations between the Catholic authorities and the Ministry of Education in the late 1960s over the management and funding of schools. These events should have provided a cautionary lesson for British ministers, when they came to tackle teacher education issues in the early 1980s, although they were, no doubt, more understandably concerned about the allocation of resources in a situation of predicted falling rolls and influenced by perceptions imported from their English constituencies. A pragmatic policy initiative might well have appeared to be a logical response to demographic trends, even if some were to interpret it as a frontal assault on the Catholic education system. As always in such situations, policy motives were no doubt complex.

Politicians and civil servants involved in the so-called Chilver debate were presumably keenly aware of developments in teacher-training in Great Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, as the academic demands of the Robbins Report (1963) in relation to an all-graduate profession and a severe demographic downturn forced the closure or merger of the more vulnerable teacher education colleges. Perhaps the most interesting developments occurred in West London and Liverpool, where merged and religiously integrated institutions—the Roehampton Institute and the Liverpool Institute—resulted from the maelstrom of change in the previously cosy world of teacher education. Was there here perhaps a model for a religiously divided community such as Northern Ireland? If it could happen in Liverpool where Orange banners were still paraded regularly, why not in a divided city such as Belfast? These models may indeed have influenced the Chilver debate and it was hardly coincidental that the Principal of the English Catholic College which had joined with its Anglican and Methodist counterparts to form the Roehampton federation—Sister Dorothy Bell of Digby Stuart College—was appointed to the Chilver Review Group.

The Northern Ireland Catholic Colleges in the course of their anti-Chilver campaign invited a representative from the Liverpool Institute to brief them on developments there and were quick to point out two fundamental differences between Liverpool and Belfast: in the case of the former an Anglican and a Catholic College had come together in an ecumenical, Christian context whereas Stranmillis, their potential partner, was a non-denominational, 'state' College—a different kind of institution altogether; secondly, the Liverpool experiment had allowed the Catholic College to retain its site and physical plant. Clearly, therefore, the English context had a considerable impact on the thinking of many involved in the Chilver controversy.

From 1925 onwards, the position of the Catholic Church in teacher education in Northern Ireland had, if anything, been strengthened by the policies of successive Unionist governments which had achieved a *modus vivendi* between Church and State by the 1960s. In particular, the *Report of the Gibbon Committee* (1948) had urged the replacement of the Strawberry Hill experiment with local provision for Catholic men, leading to the establishment of Trench House in West Belfast in 1947 as the male department of St. Mary's. In 1961–62 it evolved into a separate College in its own right, St. Joseph's. The objective of the Northern Bishops in the early 1920s had at last been realised.

The *Lockwood Report on Higher Education in Northern Ireland* (1965) created the New University of Ulster (NUU), controversially located at Coleraine, and the Ulster College (a polytechnic) at Jordanstown. In terms of teacher education, Lockwood resulted in provision at Jordanstown and Coleraine and elevated St. Mary's, St. Joseph's and Stranmillis as 'recognised Colleges' of QUB. The Report (para. 247) had 'welcomed the willingness of Queen's University to enter a new relationship with the training colleges' and to permit qualified students to read for university degrees within the Colleges. A new general BEd degree emerged, along with Graduate Certificate courses at the Colleges. The three Colleges were linked to QUB and its own Department of Education, which offered a post-graduate Dip. Ed. Thus, the concept of the 'Belfast Complex' for teacher education was born.

The year 1973 saw the publication of the Lelièvre Report on the education, initial training and probation of teachers in Northern Ireland. Seemingly oblivious to the teacher education cull by then in progress across the Irish Sea, Lelièvre predicted an expansion in teacher education in Northern Ireland.

The Department of Education (DENI), however, took fright at the demographic statistics and imposed swingeing teacher education intake cuts from 1975 onwards. The realisation that the birth rate had fallen, and was continuing to fall steeply, convinced DENI that a series of substantial cuts in intakes was required. But questions remain about these decisions. Were the Department's new statistical forecasts about teacher demand any more accurate than its previous ones? The subsequent Chilver debate was to be based on the acceptance of these projections, but, very late in the day, they came to be challenged and indeed amended. Were the cuts applied fairly across the sector? Certainly, the members of the 'Belfast Complex' came to feel that they were not. In particular, given that NUU, after an initial surge from 1968 to 1971, had failed to take off fully as a university level institution, with total numbers peaking around 1500, and given that the proportion of its full-time, undergraduate students taking education courses by 1975 had risen to 33 per cent (from only ten per cent in 1970), it is easy to see how such suspicions arose. The Ulster College, on the other hand, under the dynamic leadership of Derek Birley, was thriving. The members of the Belfast Complex became convinced that DENI was treating them unfairly in order to keep NUU open and to assist the growth of the Ulster College, thereby helping to justify the decisions to establish both in the first place and to commit considerable public funds to them.

There is no question, however, that the teacher education intake reductions bore more heavily on the Belfast Complex than on the new institutions. The real losers were the Colleges as the figures for the percentage reduction in intakes for the period from 1974 to 1978 reveal (see Table 1).

Stranmillis, in particular, once the jewel in the crown of the old Ministry of Education, had been the most brutally treated by DENI. It lost half of its intake in four years, though the impact on staff was to be cushioned by generous, English-style early retirement arrangements. However, the direct rule Labour Minister responsible for higher education in Northern Ireland during 1976-9, Lord Peter Melchett, had more to worry about than apparent over-provision in teacher education. There was the continuing concern about the long-term viability of NUU, while the publication in February 1978 by the Department of Education and Science and the Scottish Education Department of a discussion document, *Higher Education into the 1990s*, painted a gloomy picture, predicting a rise and decline in numbers in higher education in the 1980s (with 1982 as the peak year), followed by a very steep fall in the 1990s.

Faced with all of these issues, Lord Melchett announced on 8 December 1978 the establishment of a Review Group to carry out an independent examination of higher education in Northern Ireland. Sir Henry Chilver, Vice-Chancellor of the Cranfield Institute of Technology in Bedfordshire, had been invited to chair the Higher Education Review Group (or the Chilver Committee as it was to become popularly known). The membership was a predictable blend of Northern Irish and British members, drawn from higher education, the public sector and the world of work. In

Table 1. Intakes to initial teacher education in Northern Ireland between 1974 and 1983

Intakes to Initial Teacher Education (NI) 1974-83	1974	1975	1983
St. Mary's College	203	172	195
St. Joseph's College	154	151	-
Stranmillis College	454	391	195
NUU	177	237	70
QUB	171	180	90
Ulster College (excluding Special Care course)	151	190	60

Note. A very small intake at the North West College has not been included, as it was phased out after 1983.

Percentage reduction in intakes to initial teacher education in selected institutions in NI between 1974 and 1978

Ulster College	13.9
New University of Ulster	15.3
St. Joseph's College	31.8
St. Mary's College	45.8
Stranmillis College	50.4

terms of the religious background of its membership, the Group was fairly evenly balanced between Catholics and Protestants. Apart from Sister Dorothy Bell, those with a direct interest in teacher education were few—Gerry Quigley, Secretary of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation and, to a lesser extent, Dr John Harbinson, Vice-Principal of the Belfast College of Business Studies. The local Catholic education sector was not therefore strongly represented, a point raised in the subsequent debate by church spokespersons. Thus, Rev. Brian Brady, the leading publicist of the Catholic viewpoint, alleged that only four of the Review Group's 11 members were Catholic and of them, 'at least three ... are openly integrationist in their views'. This, he declared, underlined 'how poorly, if at all, the Catholic viewpoint on education is represented on the committee' (*Irish News*, 24 June 1980). All of this was happening of course in an extremely tense political context, as far as Northern Ireland was concerned. In the early 1980s, the nationalist/republican community was mentally in a state of siege and this was to be further reinforced by the emotional trauma of the hunger strikes. Even in a less highly charged atmosphere, any attempt at rationalisation of provision in education was likely to prove contentious.

Lord Melchett emphasised that the implications of current demographic trends and 'the recent cut-back in teacher training' would be on the Review Group's agenda. Even so, a document in the St. Mary's archive, reporting a meeting between its Principal, Sister Cornelia Dooley, the Principal of St. Joseph's, Canon Michael Dallat and Monsignor P.J. Mullally of the Trustees on 5 January 1979, makes it clear that the Monsignor at least was not too concerned. He had it on good authority that 'the main thrust of the Review Body's investigations would not concern the Colleges; that other institutions will be for scrutiny; that apprehension need not be entertained by College members about (the) future, or maintenance of status quo'. Nonetheless, the document relayed to the staff members of the special Committee which had been established at St. Mary's, a clear strategy from the clerical Trustees. 'The stance is that we never contemplate the amalgamation of the two Colleges (much less that of the three). In case the former is adopted as a fall-back position to the introduction of the second, we are warned that they are equally unacceptable ... We should deplore the progressive expansion by P.T. (Polytechnic) and NUU into teacher training as trespassing upon (the) field of (the) Colleges'. As things turned out, Mullally's optimism was misplaced and, ultimately, the amalgamation of St. Mary's and St. Joseph's came to be seen as the lesser of two evils.

Following a period of institutional contacts and visits by the Chairman in early 1979, the Group received submissions from all of the members of the Belfast Complex. An initial attempt was made to maintain a united front through the development of a joint submission, but in the end this was overtaken by events. The members of the Complex in their individual submissions were all united in attacking the expanded involvement of NUU and the Ulster College in teacher education. However, some differences between them started to emerge as early as March 1979, when the Stranmillis submission argued for some strengthening of the existing links with QUB, combined with university college status for the College. The submission

also sought to grasp the nettle of religiously integrated teacher education. Significantly, the document stressed the fact that Stranmillis was open to all and indicated a willingness on its part to consider 'more formal inter-collegiate arrangements for reducing the degree of separation that exists at present and (we) would welcome integrated provision for the training of teachers' (para. 10.3). However, this could only be achieved on the basis of mutual consent. 'There is no desire to try to force an unacceptable pattern on any institution'. This was to dictate the Stranmillis approach as the controversy unfolded.

The St. Joseph's and St. Mary's submissions in April and May 1979 rehearsed the case for their continued existence, studiously avoiding any mention of integrated education or even of strengthened links with QUB. The St. Mary's document also raised the issue of the need to allocate to both Catholic Colleges a much greater share of pre-service intake numbers (37.6 per cent was suggested as opposed to the then current figure of 26.6 per cent), based on the percentage of Catholics in the total NI population (para. 4.31). This issue was to assume considerable importance, as an alleged matter of justice, in the subsequent debates, drawing criticism from the Presbyterian Church (*News Letter*, 19 January 1982).

By December 1979, however, the situation had changed even more dramatically with QUB presenting its separate submission to the Review Group. In the University's view, the announcement by DENI of reduced intake figures for the Colleges of Education for 1980-81 seriously jeopardised their viability, given that these figures seemed likely to be maintained or further reduced in the immediate future.

The QUB document therefore 'strongly' recommended a concentration of teacher education and training on the Stranmillis site, with three possible options, namely, a single autonomous College of Education linked to QUB, a confederation of a state College and a voluntary College, or a replacement of the Colleges by a University School of Education. It advocated detailed negotiations with DENI and all other interested parties to explore these options. Clearly, QUB had broken ranks with its partners in the Belfast Complex, shattering at a stroke the complacent confidence about the Review Group's work that had prevailed amongst some at the beginning of the year. The Belfast Colleges had a crisis on their hands and certainly the QUB document's radical analysis was to be significantly reflected in the Review Group's interim report on teacher education when it finally appeared in June 1980.

As the new year and the new decade dawned, the Catholic Colleges and their episcopal Trustees mobilised for action. A full realisation of the dangers facing them was now apparent. As Sister Cornelia succinctly put it in a public letter to the principals and teachers in the maintained schools system, dated January 1980: 'The Government is short of money; the University wants to merge all three colleges into their system. "Rationalisation" is a nice cover-word for liquidation'. This letter marked the beginning of a vigorous publicity campaign involving media statements and 'planted' articles in the nationalist press, an address by Bishop Edward Daly to the Irish Priests' Conference in Newry, the widespread circulation of various documents setting out the Catholic case, the enlistment of political support notably

from the SDLP and from the West Belfast Independent MP, Gerry Fitt, and intense lobbying of the Minister, Lord Elton, Lord Melchett's successor as Education Minister, following the accession of the Thatcher Conservative government in May 1979. He, in turn, would shortly be replaced by the relatively youthful and urbane Nicholas Scott who came to personify the Chilver proposals.

The press offensive was spearheaded by the *Irish News* which cited the late Cardinal Conway's classic defence of Catholic schools—permeated by a Catholic ethos and staffed by Catholic teachers—and asked bluntly: 'Why the new onslaught on Catholic education by way of the limitation of teachers and the closure of Catholic Training Colleges?' Perhaps, the newspaper commented, '...the Catholic school authorities and their ecclesiastical advisers have ... too readily jumped to the conclusion that the long night of Catholic exclusion was over ...' The *Irish News* warned that it 'would be dangerous for the Catholic community to be lulled into a sense of false assurance' by the growth of the "ecumenical spirit" and the presence of 'English ministers at Stormont'. 'We must face the fact that there has always been a powerful prejudice against Catholic schools', declared the newspaper; unless Catholic parents 'stood firm', they might 'lose much of their precious heritage of Catholic education' (*Irish News*, 9 June 1980).

For his part, Gerry Fitt warned on 17 June 1980, as speculation about Chilver mounted, that any attempt to abolish the Catholic Colleges would be seen as 'an attack on the Catholic community as a whole' and would provoke 'fierce opposition' at Westminster from Government MPs 'who see this step as the thin end of the wedge'. Fitt's concerns were echoed by the SDLP, while even the pro-integrated education Alliance Party, while welcoming any moves towards 'greater co-operation' in teacher-training, stressed the vital importance of protecting all the parties including the Catholic Church (*Irish News*, 17 June 1980). Surprisingly, perhaps, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party observed a striking public silence on the issue at this stage.

It is clear that the Church authorities saw the Chilver issue against the wider political situation and the efforts of the British Government in the Spring of 1980 to foster agreement between the major political parties on a devolved administration at Stormont. This need to achieve consensus at the forthcoming Atkins conference may have led an unnamed senior member of St. Mary's staff to inform the *Irish News* that the Government 'could not afford to antagonise the law-abiding, peaceful Catholic community' by attacking their 'human and religious rights' (*Irish News*, 17 June 1980).

At this stage, the Church's campaign was simply reacting to press speculation about the impending Chilver proposals which did not appear until the eve of the summer vacation on 22 June. The campaign culminated in the designation by Bishop Philbin of Down and Connor of 8 June 1980 as 'Education Sunday', with the celebration of a special liturgy on the theme of Catholic education, highlighting the benefits of a separate Catholic education system, the right of the Catholic population in Northern Ireland to enjoy those benefits, as in England or the USA and urging the

Catholic community to resist any attempt to erode the Church's control of education (*Belfast Telegraph*, 9 June 1980).

Despite these seemingly confident assertions, however, behind the scenes the Trustees and the Catholic Colleges were now seriously considering the idea of a merger of St. Mary's and St. Joseph's, preferably on two sites, as their irreducible minimum in any post-Chilver negotiations. This, it was argued, would result in a viable, single College of around 800 students. Optimism remained, however, that the government would back down in the realisation that any interference with the Catholic system would be 'political dynamite', particularly in the context of the ongoing constitutional talks.

On 23 June 1980 the media finally reported the publication of the interim report on teacher education of the Higher Education Review Group. The press speculation in early June about the likely contents turned out to have been uncannily accurate. The key recommendations included the amalgamation of St. Mary's and St. Joseph's and the creation of a Belfast Centre for Teacher Education, bringing together the amalgamated Catholic college, Stranmillis College and the QUB Department of Education on the Stranmillis site. The details were to be left to the various interests to work out. It was suggested, however, that 'each of the three partners in the Belfast Centre for Teacher Education could maintain a separate legal and administrative existence' but the Report also referred to 'co-operation and mutual academic support' and the 'efficient use of resources at the lower enrolment levels now envisaged'.

This, coupled with the suggestion that both Stranmillis and the amalgamated voluntary college should continue to be separately staffed only in areas such as religious education, certainly created the impression that a significant degree of integrated teaching was anticipated. Indeed, the Report advocated a large degree of co-ordination and mutual support between QUB and the Colleges on academic and practical matters.

Unhappy as the Trustees of the Catholic Colleges were about these proposals, at least they had been largely anticipated and the subsequent public debate tended to focus on the proposed scenario for the Stranmillis site. However, there were other less expected recommendations which appeared equally threatening to Catholic educational principles and to Stranmillis College. The continuation of teacher education at both NUU and the Ulster College was endorsed, with the Ulster College set to retain its 'specialist' provision in physical education, home economics, craft design and technology, art and music as well as catering for the future training of further education teachers. It was also suggested that to avoid unnecessary duplication, other teacher education centres should make only limited provision for Physical Education and Home Economics and their provision in Art, Music and CDT should be co-ordinated with that at the Ulster College. This was immediately seen by all three Belfast Colleges as a serious threat and by the Catholic Church as an attack on the principles of Catholic education.

There is some evidence in the St. Mary's archive of limited staff support at St. Mary's for further exploration of the Stranmillis single-site proposal, albeit on the

basis of a 'completely autonomous' Catholic College there, complete with its own oratory. However, the College's Development Committee concluded that in the absence of significant capital expenditure on the Stranmillis site: 'The Belfast Teaching Centre would therefore be an integrated college, using the existing Stranmillis buildings, with limited provision for a separate Catholic presence. There could not be an autonomous Catholic college with its own chapel on the single site'.

Subsequently, Stranmillis in its official response, submitted to Lord Elton on 27 November 1980, while sticking to its preference for a unified, single University College, rejected the Chilver idea of three autonomous institutions on a single site as unworkable and opted for a federal institute on a split site as a second best. The Stranmillis submission also argued for the transfer of all teacher education activity in Derry and Jordanstown to Belfast.

A document in the St. Mary's archive, setting out the position of the Bishops on the Report, noted that the failure to include any representative of the Catholic Trustees on the Review Group has resulted in a failure 'genuinely to recognise and acknowledge the fundamental principles on which denominational education is founded' and noted that 'Catholic education is not secular education plus religious instruction'. The Report was seen as a first step in destroying 'our right to train our own Catholic teachers' and therefore jeopardised the whole Catholic school system. The Catholic people 'must have their own Catholic training colleges to provide these Catholic teachers. They will not settle for less'. The battle lines had thus been clearly drawn by the autumn of 1980. The key issue was how far the British Government would be prepared to go in implementing the Review Group's proposals. The Chilver Group itself meanwhile had now moved on to its bigger task of sorting out the NI higher education system as a whole—a process which would eventually lead to another contentious merger proposal, that involving NUU and the Ulster Polytechnic.

By the autumn of 1981, the situation did not appear to be particularly encouraging from the perspective of those opposed to Chilver and it seemed that after a relatively quiet period, the battle over the proposals would be renewed. The new Minister, Nicholas Scott, had made it clear on the 1st of October that the status quo was not an option and that, in the absence of consensus, Government would have to make a final decision, following further consultations. His statement that no solution would be satisfactory to all parties was taken by some as a clear hint that he intended to press ahead with rationalisation on the Stranmillis site.

On 5 November 1981, the Minister announced his intention of entering into negotiations which would be designed to 'ensure that the Report's recommendations were ... pursued to a conclusion'. He also claimed that Catholic 'fears have been awakened unnecessarily'. As to the Chilver proposals, none of the suggested alternatives, Mr Scott believed, appeared to offer the 'same prospects of academic strength and financial effectiveness'. The Catholic Bishops, led by Drs Philbin and Daly, reiterated their total opposition while the *Irish News* angrily accused Mr Scott of 'blundering with hob-nailed boots into the profoundly important and delicate subject of Catholic education in Northern Ireland and, at that, into the very source of

Catholic education, the training of Catholic teachers...’ (*Irish News*, 6 November 1981). A concerted letter-writing campaign was arranged by the Catholic authorities and a petition demanding a separate, autonomous Catholic presence in teacher education and a minimum 40 per cent quota of students to be allocated to the Catholic Colleges was launched on Education Sunday—17 January 1982. On that day a pastoral letter was read at all Catholic services throughout Northern Ireland and a special liturgy celebrated. Some 270,000 signatures were ultimately collected. At this point the Church authorities were heartened by reports on the controversy in the American press and efforts were made to embarrass the British Government over a statement from the British Information Bureau in Washington in the *New York Daily News* that the Catholic Colleges would be ‘closed’ (*Irish News*, 16 January 1982).

Already on 8 November 1981, the *Belfast Telegraph*, which had broadly supported the Chilver recommendations, had noted the ‘ferocity’ of the Catholic Church’s attack on Nicholas Scott.

Until this stage, the Protestant Churches and the main Unionist parties had refrained from entering the increasingly bitter debate but by mid-January 1982, however, there were signs of Protestant–Unionist concerns at some of the implications of Chilver. For the D.U.P., Councillor Sammy Wilson voiced his party’s objection to the erection of a Catholic chapel on the Stranmillis site, if the single-site proposal went ahead: ‘The education provided at Stranmillis is secular . . . and must remain so’, he stressed (*Irish News*, 20 January 1982). Challenged on this point, Mr Scott painfully acknowledged that the Government had not the power, because of the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, to endow a chapel on the site (*Irish News*, 23 January 1982).

This new controversy coincided with a statement on 19 January 1982 by Rev. Tom Simpson, the Presbyterian Church’s spokesman on education, revealing that the church was ‘not totally in favour of the Chilver proposal that (the two Catholic Colleges) be closed down and moved to a separate site at Stranmillis’. The Presbyterian Church, he averred, did not feel an integrated system was possible while the schools remained segregated and favoured ‘a Collegiate system’ in which each college would retain its identity and intake with ‘shared classes’, where possible (*News Letter*, 19 January 1982). Pledging to fight to retain Stranmillis as a viable teacher-training college, Rev. Simpson declared that the Presbyterian Church was against ‘forced integration—all Churches must be behind it’ (*Belfast Telegraph*, 19 January 1982).

This crucial intervention at the eleventh hour was reinforced by a public letter in a similar vein from the Deputy Principal of Stranmillis, James Hughes, dated 20 February 1982. This suggested that given the hostility of the Catholic Church towards integration into a single College, rationalisation should take the form of the concentration of all teacher education at QUB and the Belfast Colleges.

The Minister, Mr Scott, sought to justify his support for the Chilver proposals to the House of Commons on 1 March 1982, stressing that in Northern Ireland there was the capacity in the six existing institutions to train twice as many teachers as

were needed, that student-staff ratios in the three Colleges were around 5.7 or 5.8 to 1, whereas in Great Britain there was a 10:1 ratio and that the demand by the Catholic Colleges for 40 per cent of the intake of students was unacceptable, because 'to do so would give St. Mary's and St. Joseph's a virtual monopoly of training teachers for the Catholic schools in NI'. During the debate he was challenged by Enoch Powell, who defended the Stranmillis position. Yet, despite the continued fury of the Catholic authorities, there were hints that Mr Scott was softening his line, notably in his remark on 21 January 1982 that he did not rule out an amalgamation of the Catholic Colleges on one of their own West Belfast sites (*Irish News*, 22 January 1982).

The main Chilver Report was published on 23 March and it proposed, as anticipated, a new 'polyversity'. The accompanying Government statement made no reference whatsoever to the Belfast Colleges of Education but insisted that there would have to be teacher education provision in the new 'polyversity', in all probability on the Coleraine campus. Despite press speculation that the Catholic Church would secure a complete victory, the Report had simply reiterated the Committee's proposals for a single site reorganisation of the Belfast institutions.

By early May 1982 the Principals of St. Mary's and St. Joseph's, on behalf of their Academic Boards, felt obliged formally to advise the Trustees that the time had come to offer amalgamation to the Government, in the face of the threat of a financial melt-down. DENI was suspected of following a 'wither-on-the-vine' policy, as practised in England by the Department of Education and Science (DES). An offer of amalgamation would hopefully force the Government to respond positively on the issue of future intakes, thus securing a viable, single Catholic College. Certainly, the staff of all three Belfast Colleges had every reason to be worried about the viability issue as the Department had warned them on 30 December 1981 that future funding would be based on a reduced staffing entitlement. Also, during the summer of 1982 abortive merger discussions took place between Stranmillis and QUB, further complicating an already tangled issue.

The upshot on the Catholic side of this deteriorating situation was the presentation by Bishops Cahal and Edward Daly at a meeting with the Minister on 26 November 1982 of a formal set of proposals entitled: 'The future of the Catholic presence in teacher education in Northern Ireland'. The appointment of the ecumenical and highly respected Bishop Cahal Daly as successor to the ageing Bishop Philbin earlier that year was in itself a significant development, since he was determined to end the teacher education impasse.

The Bishops' proposals incorporated the idea of a single, co-educational Catholic College in the vital context of increased co-operation with Stranmillis College, along the lines advocated by the *Violence in Ireland report*, which had been co-edited in 1976 by Bishop Cahal Daly and Dr Eric Gallagher of the Methodist Church. Clearly, the Bishops had timed their offer carefully, holding back until they were able to link it with an offer of closer co-operation with Stranmillis.

The offer was formally accepted by Government in its White Paper: *Teacher training in Northern Ireland: the future structure*, published on 22 December 1982:

'The amalgamation of the two voluntary colleges, which has been proposed by their Trustees, is also a useful step towards a more streamlined system, and as such is welcomed by Government'. A welcome was also expressed for the proposal to develop greater co-operation with Stranmillis both from an ecumenical perspective and in view of the need to create 'a cost-effective system'. The primacy of the Colleges in relation to preparing teachers for the primary sector was also recognised. However, while some improvement in intakes, related to a projected growth in demand for teachers in primary schools in the 1990s, was offered, in the case of the Catholic College(s) this fell well short of the much demanded 40 per cent target (31.9 per cent for 1983). The proposals were based on intake projections contained in DENI's *Working paper on future trends in teacher education* of November 1981 and on the work of the recently established Teacher Education Allocations Committee (TEAC), chaired by William Taylor. The rub for all of the Colleges, however, was the proposal to concentrate training in the so-called 'specialist' secondary subjects in the new 'polyversity'. Stranmillis, St. Mary's and St. Joseph's now united against this proposal and offered the prospect of academic co-operation in 'specialist' subjects, though with only limited success.

Nicholas Scott, having considered reactions to his December White Paper, delivered his decisions in a letter to Bishop Daly on 18 April 1983. This confirmed that undergraduate secondary training for teachers of PE, Home Economics, Music and Art would be provided at the Ulster Polytechnic, leaving Religious Studies, CDT and Commercial Studies as the only secondary provision at the Colleges.

What lessons can be drawn from this significant episode in the educational history of Northern Ireland? Clearly, the most radical aspect of the Chilver proposals, the Stranmillis single site plan, which had been endorsed by Nicholas Scott in the House of Commons as late as 1 March 1982, was not in the end implemented. Following an extremely effective campaign of opposition mounted by the Catholic Church and its political allies, the Minister was happy to settle for the merger of the two existing Catholic Colleges, linked to a rationalisation of teacher education for the secondary sector. Undoubtedly, the Church's offer had been carefully timed politically by the Catholic Bishops, galvanised by the new Bishop of Down and Connor, Cahal Daly, with his impeccable ecumenical and anti-violence credentials.

Arguably, the Chilver episode provides one of many examples of the political naïvety of direct rule administrations in Northern Ireland after 1972 and of their inbuilt momentum towards parity of policy with England. The experiences of Londonderry and Charlemont in the 1920s and 1930s, not to mention the ubiquity of denominationalism in relation to education generally in Northern Ireland, had understandably perhaps been forgotten, as politicians and civil servants grappled with the more pragmatic considerations of value for money and declining school rolls. The release of the relevant government papers over the next five to ten years will no doubt throw greater light on the thinking which lay behind policy developments. Lord Melchett had proceeded to appoint a Review Group which was less than fully representative of Northern Ireland's powerful vested interests. The power and influence of the Catholic Church at a critical time in Northern Ireland's

political history had clearly been underestimated by Stormont Castle, as had the economic, emotional and symbolic significance of a proposal to withdraw higher education provision from the social and political cockpit that was West Belfast. Indeed, it could be argued that the British Government needed to retain the active co-operation of the Catholic Church as a vital link with community groups, especially in the wake of the 1981 republican Hunger Strike with its political fallout. A British Minister appeared to some to be threatening the whole system of Northern Irish Catholic education, even if the reality was much more prosaic, since in Catholic teacher education, as in the maintained schools sector, religion was seen as absolutely central. This 'unprecedented threat' had shocked the Catholic hierarchy, the nationalist political establishment and press and ordinary Catholics into action by 1982. Thus, in the political and social context of the 1980s, the Chilver proposals did indeed represent an educational 'bridge too far'.

Given that the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning have recently initiated a renewed debate on the future of teacher education in Northern Ireland, following a conference of relevant stakeholders held in Limavady in the Spring of 2003, it remains to be seen whether the somewhat changed political, social and educational context, as compared with the 1980s, will produce a different result on this occasion. Once again an ebbing demographic tide may, for better or worse, expose the 'steeples' of the North to plain view.

Archival sources

The content of this paper is partly based on uncatalogued and unpublished source materials held by St. Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College. The assistance and co-operation of the authorities in both institutions are gratefully acknowledged by the authors.

Although the archival material in both institutions has yet to be catalogued and properly referenced, the following files were found to be particularly useful:

St Mary's University College

1. 'Chilver' files, which include details of the organisation of the publicity campaign to defend the perceived threat to the Catholic educational system, submissions to the Chilver Committee and a variety of correspondence related to the issue.
2. Minutes of the meetings of St. Mary's College of Education Development Committee, 1979 onwards.
3. Minutes of the Board of Management of St. Mary's College of Education 1981-85.
4. Minutes of the St. Mary's College of Education Academic Board 1979-82.
5. Minutes of the Board of Management of St Joseph's College of Education 1982-84.

Stranmillis University College

1. 'Chilver' file which includes press cuttings, details of various publicity initiatives and copies of the College's submissions to the Chilver Committee.
2. Minutes of the Board of Governors of Stranmillis College for the period 1979–84.

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