My Lords, I beg to move that the Bill be now read a second time.

My Lords, the House will be aware that I am now the Minister in charge of this Bill, rather than my noble friend, Lord Wallace of Saltaire in whose name this Bill was introduced.

I am happy to assure the House that I too believe that the provisions of this Bill are compatible with the Convention Rights and would have been content to sign the necessary statement had I been in a position to do so when the Bill was introduced.

My Lords this Bill will:

Grant more freedoms to schools;
Give more responsibility to teachers;
And help ensure that standards rise for all children.

Last week we had an excellent debate on the measures contained in the Gracious Speech.

Re-reading the whole debate over the weekend, I found that there was broad agreement on the need to trust professionals more, to reduce the bureaucracy they face and to give them more opportunity to drive their own improvement and to deploy resources in the most effective way.

It is precisely those freedoms that the measures contained in the Academies Bill will help to deliver.

My Lords I have had very thoughtful discussions with the right reverend Prelate, the Bishop of Lincoln and others about managing expectations for this Bill.

So let me be clear from the outset that this Bill does not in our view represent a revolution in our schools system.

Rather, it builds on what has gone before.

We can trace its roots to the reforms introduced by my noble friend, Lord Baker, through the Education Reform Act 1988, which led to the opening of the first City Technology Colleges in the late 1980s and early ‘90s.

But it was under a Labour government that the pace of reform really picked up
and I recognise that contribution very clearly. The Learning and Skills Act 2000, saw the beginning of the Academies programme, and the Education White Paper of 2005 built on it.

I hope I won’t embarrass the noble Lord, Lord Adonis by saying what I said in his absence last week, how much I respect his achievement, and what high standards he set for those who came after him.

I am happy to pay tribute to him, and to my other predecessors who should feel pleased at the good they have done through the Academies programme and the thousands of children’s lives they have already changed for the better.

My Lords, I do not for one moment argue that Academies are always going to be the answer. The noble Baroness, Baroness Morris of Yardley reminded us in the debate on the Gracious Speech that many outstanding schools are not Academies. And that not all Academies are outstanding. She is of course right.

But, overall, Academies do represent one of the best and fastest routes to school improvement.

They have transformed some of the worst performing schools in the country into some of the best.

And in doing so, they have transformed the prospects of tens of thousands of young people. In 2008 and 2009, Academies saw GCSE results increase twice as fast as the national average.

My Lords, it is also clear that the extension of the Academies programme we now propose was what the then Labour Government itself intended to do. In a speech given the day before the publication of the 2005 White Paper, this is what the then Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon Tony Blair, had to say:

“We need to make it easier for every school to acquire the drive and essential freedom of Academies…. We want every school to be able quickly and easily to become a self-governing independent state school… All schools will be able to have academy style freedoms… No one will be able to veto parents starting new schools or new providers coming in, simply on the basis that there are local surplus places. The role of the LEA will change fundamentally.”

It has taken 5 years my Lords, but this Bill is giving effect to what the previous government intended.

My Lords, it is worth reminding ourselves why we need reform.

Despite the best efforts of previous Governments, it is still the case that 81,000 11 year olds left primary school last year without achieving the required standard in reading.
Half of young people left secondary school without achieving five good GCSEs including English and Maths.

And in the last year for which we have data, out of 80,000 young people eligible for free school meals, just 45 made it to Oxbridge.

My Lords, raising standards is not simply about structures – that was a point well made in last week’s debate. It is about the quality of teaching – which is why we will build on the previous government’s excellent Teach First programme.

And at a time of great pressure in public spending we have also prioritised investment in education by protecting frontline spending this financial year for Sure Start Children’s Centres, for 16-19 learning and, of course, for schools.

But we do believe that giving schools and teachers more freedoms will help them do the job they came into teaching to do.

This Bill will give all schools – including, for the first time, primary schools and special schools—the opportunity to apply to become an Academy.

I want to stress the word ‘opportunity’. This is largely a permissive Bill rather than a coercive one.

And it will help schools right across the spectrum, from the very worst to the very best.

Schools already rated as outstanding by Ofsted may have their applications fast-tracked, and open this year if they wish to.

In return, we will expect every outstanding school which acquires academy freedoms to partner with at least one other school to raise performance across the system.

Schools that are really struggling, my Lords, will see Government intervention. There has always been a focus in the Academies programme on the weakest schools, and that will continue.

The Bill will allow the Secretary of State, in circumstances where a school is struggling, to remove a school from the control of the local authority and to reopen it as an Academy.

This will mean that we can deliver faster and deeper improvements in deprived and disadvantaged areas.

And for the schools in between, my Lords – those that are doing well but could do better – academies will present a real opportunity to achieve excellent results through the core freedoms that all Academies enjoy: making their own decisions about the curriculum, teachers’ pay, the length of the school day and how they spend the money currently spent on their behalf by
local government.

But, again, it will be for head teachers, governing bodies and school trustees to decide whether or not to apply.

My Lords, I was struck by this sentence in the speech made by the noble Baroness, Baroness Morgan of Drefelin last week: “There is a good argument for successful schools being given more managerial autonomy and flexibility, provided that that is on the basis of fair admissions, fair funding and a recognition of their wider school improvement responsibilities.”

I thought that was a very fair statement and summed up what we are trying to achieve with this Bill very well.

This Bill will not just help a small proportion of pupils in leafy suburbs – the original focus of the Academies programme on underperformance and deprivation will remain a key feature.

This Bill will not allow a small number of schools to float free above the rest of the state school system – it will help all schools improve standards by increasing the number of heads inspiring heads and teachers learning from teachers through greater partnerships between schools.

This Bill will not impinge upon a school’s unique ethos or religious character if it becomes an Academy – we want to give schools greater freedoms, and the preservation of a school’s unique ethos will be an important consideration in deciding whether or not to apply for Academy status.

That is also why the legislation ensures that for foundation schools and voluntary schools with a foundation, consent must be gained from the trustees of the school’s foundation before the school can apply to become an Academy.

This Bill does not provide a back-door to selection – while the small number of schools that are currently selective will be able to keep their selective status, if they choose to become an Academy, non-selective schools will not be able suddenly to become selective. A fair and open admissions policy will mean that intakes at Academies will be diverse, inclusive and drawn from the local community.

And we will aim to ensure that the position with maintained special schools is mirrored – we want a special school that converts to an Academy still only to take children with statements.

The Bill will not disadvantage any maintained school financially, nor will there be extra funding going to academies that maintained schools will not get.

Finally my Lords, this Bill will not create a two-tier schools system. Indeed, we believe that it will help close the gap in our current system.
And most importantly of all, while it is not catered for in the Bill currently before you for consideration, we will also target resources on the poorest through a new pupil premium. That will take money from outside the schools budget to make sure that those teaching the children most in need get extra resources, for example to deliver smaller class sizes, more one-to-one tuition, longer school days and more extra-curricular activities.

In concluding, my Lords, may I update you on the response we have received from schools so far.

In a little over a week, over one thousand one hundred schools have expressed an interest in applying for Academy freedoms.

More than 620 outstanding schools – including over 250 outstanding primaries and over half of the outstanding secondaries – have expressed their interest, along with more than 50 special schools.

So there seems to be a real demand for the measures in this Bill.

Our aim is to meet it and to ensure that:

Heads and teachers have the freedoms they want and need;

Parents have the choice of a good local school;

And a child’s background does not dictate whether they succeed.

I know that this is a vision that is shared on all sides of this House.

My Lords, I am pleased to present this Bill for your consideration.

And I beg move that the Bill be now read for a second time.