

**Address at the Opening of the
National Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary
Sector**

By

Professor John Coolahan

The Clock Tower, Department of Education and Skills

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Welcome and Introduction

Minister, Bishops, Secretary General, delegates and visitors, on behalf of the Advisory Group, I extend a very warm welcome to you all to these Discussion Days of the National Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector. We wish to record our sincere thanks to all who have made submissions to the Forum, with over 200 submissions received. While our concentration during these Discussion Days will be on the submissions made by the thirteen key stakeholders, invited by the Minister, and on the submission of the Department of Education and Skills, I can assure all those who have made submissions that they are being carefully considered and reflected on. I am aware that some people who have made submissions are here in the audience today or are listening/ watching on our live web cast.

Regarding the submissions of the patronage stakeholders, it is very gratifying to note the range of the consultation which has taken place with their constituents in preparing the submissions. This has greatly broadened the level of engagement by Irish citizens in the process, which is to be very much welcomed. I would also compliment the stakeholders for getting the submissions organised within a tight time-frame, as it was necessary to get the debate of these days underway before disturbances of summer vacations etc.

The establishment of the Forum had been sought for some time by a number of stakeholders. The vast majority of the submissions record a welcome for its establishment and indicate approval for its purpose. There is now a general acceptance that the current configuration of school patronage, shaped by, and inherited from, very different historical circumstances is no longer appropriate for the composition and needs of Irish society, as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century.

The question is – how best to re-structure and re-organise the pattern of school patronage so that it is more in harmony with, and supportive of, the rights of contemporary Irish citizens? In endeavouring to reach a satisfactory solution to the issue we need to work within certain parameters. In a very direct way these include the education rights of citizens set forth in our Constitution and in our educational legislation. We also need to bear in mind our obligations under a range of international conventions and protocols to which we are a party.

The Social Context

HOW, we achieve the re-structuring is also of the utmost importance. Regrettably, over these last few years, Ireland is currently experiencing its most profound economic recession, the ramifications of which involve, for the first time since political independence, a loss of some sovereignty. The consequences of the recession have involved, for many citizens, very stressful economic, social and employment conditions. The last thing Irish society needs at present is social cleavage and conflict associated with problems affecting local school provision.

While the broad principle of adjusting current school patronage arrangements is clear, the processes are complex. Apart from legal and financial aspects the processes can often involve the unlocking of allegiances, long-held loyalties, aspects of identity and personal engagement. People can have an emotional attachment to their local schools, which needs to be understood. As I mentioned at the launch of the Forum, this is particularly the case in Ireland, where many small local schools have, over generations, been closely wedded to the life of the local community. Can social conflict over the future of schools be avoided? I am confident that it can be avoided. Will such conflict be avoided – A great deal depends on the words and actions which all of us with responsibility will engage in over the coming period. In this context, we need to consider not just our sectoral interest, but also reach out to seek accommodation with other legitimate interests. It is also crucial that unnecessary fears and apprehensions about the future of religion in schools are not fomented by any agency, including the media. Clarity of purpose, accuracy of information, appropriate communication and consultation are the entitlement of citizenry when school patronage issues are being discussed.

Trying to make more provision for the rights of some of our citizens does not mean that we trespass on the rights of others. There are likely to be adjustments and inconveniences for some citizens with the re-structuring of school patronage, but their rights will not be threatened or abolished. However, to reach a satisfactory solution, with a high degree of consensus, will involve a genuine pooling of our best collective wisdom. If re-organising school patronage were a straight-forward issue, we would not be here, and so many people would not need to spend so much time and reflection to seek a satisfactory solution. Yet, the issues should be kept in perspective. They are not unsolvable, and with good planning, generosity of spirit and goodwill towards the common good, ways forward can be devised.

Pluralism in Schooling Provision is a Common Problem

The issue of achieving a balance of rights for all citizens in relation to education, religion, pluralism and diversity has been a live problem in most democracies – it is by no means unique to Ireland. We live in a globalised environment to which Ireland, in many ways, has adapted successfully. Re-shaping our education system to cope with a much more multicultural, multi-ethnic, and more secular society is part of an on-going agenda for change. The globalisation context, however, does not mean that we neglect our national culture and heritage. Central to that is the Irish language and satisfactory provision has to be made for Irish citizens who wish their children to be educated through the first official language. The patronage issue is not one where a resolution once arrived at is one for all time. It is an issue which re-emerges in the context of organic societal changes. Thus, in facing up to the issue, we are just doing what responsible citizens have to do periodically in developed societies. Can we learn from the experience of others? Yes, we can, and we should. However, there is no best solution to fit all situations. Education systems are shaped by varying historical, cultural, economic and social forces. Our education system, here in Ireland, has been shaped by very distinctive historical circumstances, including an extended period of colonial rule. We ourselves need to work out a solution to the problems of the inherited patronage pattern that more appropriately reflects our specific contemporary circumstances. If possible, we need to do it in a way that achieves maximum agreement, and which allows for on-going incremental change in line with evolving social circumstances.

The Consultative Tradition in Modern Irish Education

In my address at the launch of the Forum on School Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, on 19 April, I drew attention to the tradition of consultative dialogue which has been a distinguishing feature of Irish educational policy-making during recent decades. From the National Education Convention of 1993 onwards, a range of consultative fora of stakeholders

has been a major element in the shaping of modern Irish education. Characteristics of these fora have been the willingness to listen to varying perspectives, the effort to understand different viewpoints, acceptance of the bona fides of people who held contrasting aspirations, reaching out in a spirit of tolerance to seek to accommodate others' views, the realisation that a pluralist society is an enrichment rather than a threat. These are the characteristics of mature democratic debate, and Irish democracy has won respect at home and abroad by the manner in which it exhibited such features. I am confident that participants in this Forum will continue this honourable tradition.

In seeking to achieve its aim of improving school patronage patterns and promoting pluralism the Forum is promoting the common good, safeguarding human rights and honouring the constitutional rights of all citizens, including the rights of children. In this context, I would invite participants to draw strength and inspiration from the five principles, enunciated in the White Paper, Charting Our Education Future (1995), to underpin modern Irish education. In the order of their listing, they were – Pluralism, Equality, Partnership, Quality, Accountability.

I suggest that each of these Principles has a huge resonance for our work in the Forum. They may not be listed in this format in the written submission to the Forum, but a reading of these submissions indicated how live these elements are to the considerations involved. A criterion of the success of the work in this Forum should be how well our proceedings promote these values for the betterment of Irish schooling.

The Character of our National School System

Our national school system is 180 years old this year, having been founded in 1831. I, for one, have had huge respect for the vision of the founders of the system, and for the extraordinary efficient way in which they laid the foundations of the system in the early years. The great historian, Donald Akenson, termed it “The Irish Education Experiment”, and so it was, as it broke new ground as a pioneering effort in many ways. It was unusual in a comparative context in that this state-aided school system became the system of the people – the school system through which the vast majority of Irish people received their first, and for many their only formal education. It has served many generations of Irish people well. In general, the national school accommodated all the pupils in the community – the rich, the poor, all ability levels, the studious, the day-dreamers – and so on. As time went on the schools became more denominationally segregated, but each denominational school also accommodated the social diversity of the hinterland of its pupils. In the modern, more multi-cultural, Ireland the national schools have been successful in accommodating greater cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity among their pupil bodies. The tradition of general inclusivity in our primary schools needs to be guarded, and we need to be alert that changes do not lead to greater social stratification in our schools, or to a two-tier primary system.

At the launch of the Forum I reminded people of how dynamic and open to change the primary schools have been over recent decades, emerging as one of the finest primary school systems in the world. Among the great strengths of the system have been the parental interest in and appetite for education, the engagement of patrons and trustees, the generous volunteerism of boards of management, the enlightened curricular policies of the State, the professionalism of the inspectorate, the qualitative leadership of school principals, and the

enlightened professionalism and caring concerns of teachers. It takes the combined efforts of all to make an admirable school system. I salute the representatives of these agencies present here today. For over 50 years I have regarded it as a privilege to be associated with the Irish educational fraternity and sorority.

The fact that our national schools are such happy, developmental and progressive places and societies for our children today fortunately coincides with modern Ireland's greater concern for the well-being and rights of children. Within the social climate of 1937, the Constitution refers to the rights of families and parents regarding the education of their children but not to the rights of children. Many modern documents, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Ireland signed in 1992, make specific reference to children's rights, including educational rights. So, in our deliberations on the educational rights of citizens, we bear children as citizens in mind, as well as parents. While children are not represented at this Forum, the Advisory Group is considering aspects of children's rights and experiences in education, and will be focussing further on that dimension in its on-going deliberations.

Diversity in Schooling as a Live Issue

While we have made reference to the inherited pattern of school patronage from an older historical past, it would be very inaccurate to portray the present framework as a static, non-developmental one. Accommodating diversity has been a live one in recent decades, as Irish society changed, and significant new developments on school patronage were initiated. Among the new patronage bodies to emerge were Educate Together, Foras Pátrúnachta, the patrons of special schools, Muslim Community and more recently the Community National

Schools, under the auspices of the VECs. These agencies deserve great credit as they carved out new patronage patterns in response to expressed citizens' needs. We greatly appreciate the attendance by representatives of these groups at the Forum and look forward to sharing and learning from their insights, experience, and suggestions. Their piloting of new patterns and development of them are a significant asset to our current concerns, and, of course, they remind us that we are not starting from 'scratch' as we explore how to extend forms of school patronage.

Happily, it is also the case that the longer established patronage bodies have also been responding to the changed parental clientele. The Church of Ireland schools have been concerned to respond to the needs of parents of other minority churches, and also of Catholic and other parents who have sought admission for their children to such schools. The Education Body of the Church of Ireland is conscious and proud of the pattern of diversity which exists in many of their schools, and we look forward to discussing their experiences with them. Almost 90% of national schools come under the patronage of the Catholic Church. While concerned to uphold the denominational character of their schools, most of their schools have a diverse pupil population and seek to be as inclusive as possible. In summary, the patronage pattern of Irish schools is less homogeneous and less exclusive than is sometimes projected. Rather, admirable attempts are already well afoot to seek to respond to the more pluralist and multi-cultural Irish society which now exists. The Advisory Group hopes that the Forum's deliberations may help the various patron bodies in their on-going attempts to be of service to Ireland's current and future citizenry.

It should also be recorded that at local level in primary and post-primary schools throughout the country boards of management, principals and teachers have been grappling with issues and problems in dealing with their more heterogeneous pupil clienteles and coming up with practical solutions within the day-to-day life of the schools. Good practice guidelines have been emerging from collective reflection on how best to accommodate the rights and needs of all pupils. The professionalism of all involved is admirable, much learning is occurring, but it is very much a work in progress.

It is also fortunate that a number of reports and discussion documents have been available at this time which deals with relevant and cognate issues. These include the report of the Irish Human Rights Commission, the Report of the Commission on School Accommodation, the Discussion Paper on a Regulatory Framework for School Enrolment - currently out for consultation, as well as research reports by bodies such as the ESRI. It is also the case that in the light of political and terrorist happenings across the world, over the last decade, the issue of education about world religions has come to the fore in the consideration of international agencies such as the Council of Europe. Their documents provide relevant insights and observations for our reflection at this time.

Thus, the work of the Forum is not operating from a “static stand” position. Rather it is moving with the current of trends already in flow. There are many omens to give hope that there may be a tide of opportunity present, which taken at the flood can lead us to success.

The Role of the Advisory Body

In the light of observations made and hopes expressed in some of the submissions to the Forum, the Advisory Group deems it necessary to clarify its role and terms of reference. In charging us with the task of conducting the Forum, Minister Quinn did not ask us to design a new blueprint for the national education system. Rather, he asked us to examine the existing form of school patronage with a view to making it more generally acceptable to all citizens. We were not asked as to whether change in existing patronage should be introduced. He stated that this was generally accepted.

He said, “The key issue that the Forum will address is how change can be implemented.”

In this context he set us three questions –

- (1) How to establish the demand for diversity of patronage
- (2) The practicalities of managing the divesting of patronage
- (3) How diversity can be accommodated where there is just one or two schools serving a community, with a static population.

These three questions with a number of sub-sets formed the template on which submissions were requested. These are difficult questions and not easily answered but, to their credit most, but not all stakeholders, focussed on them in their replies.

The Advisory Group acts as a facilitative agency endeavouring to help promote informed debate, to examine proposals, to seek out examples of good practice, to explore difficulties, to research relevant literature, and so on. In the wake of these Forum Discussion Days, and the further analysis of over 200 submissions, and further research and consultations, the Advisory Group will prepare an initial and then a final paper setting out policy advice and guidelines for action by the Minister. Minister Quinn has advised us that recommendations, “must be

capable of being implemented on a cost-neutral basis.” In the light of comments in some submissions it is also necessary to state that the Advisory Group has neither a budget nor staff to carry out significant research, or pay lawyers to advise on legal entitlements.

Essentially, we are doing our civic duty in association with educational partners, to help resolve an issue of social importance. I would also remind participants that we are working within a tight time-frame.

Thus, if I could use phrases from former ages – we have no “deus ex machina” to resolve the problem – we have no sword to cut “the Gordian knot”.

Rather, we just have to rely on detailed discussion and reflection with all views being given due consideration and respect and most importantly an openness to change that will enhance the quality of the education provided to our children into the future.

The Process of the Discussion Days

Finally, a few words about the process of these Forum Discussion Days.

- We seek to make the work of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector democratic and transparent
- All submissions to the Forum have been placed on the website
- The discussions will be broadcast live on web-cast.
- All key stakeholder representatives and members of the public who have sought tickets are invited to be present throughout the Discussion Days.
- The Advisory Group’s concentration in these days will be on the submissions of the patronage stakeholders and of the Department of Education and Skills.

- All other submissions are, and will be carefully considered by the Group.
- As a key aim of the Discussion Days is to foster mutual understanding of stakeholders' positions, and possible ways forward in a multi-lateral context, the proceedings are being conducted through the medium of English. We appreciate that An Foras Patrúnachta and Gaelscoileanna Téoranta would prefer that their contributions were through the medium of Irish, but this would deflect from the purposes of the dialogue. We mean no disrespect to the Irish language in this regard, and we appreciate their co-operation.
- The mode of interaction is by question and answer, based on the written submissions. The questioning is, of course, not adversarial or inquisitorial. Rather, it is focussed on clarifying issues, probing ideas, identifying problems, discussing good practices etc.
- The timetable over the Discussion Days is tight. It may happen that the full-time for a group may not be fully utilised, if so, a breathing space, will probably be welcomed by all.
- No interruptions are being taken from the floor, nor is any dialogue permissible other than between the Advisory Group and each Stakeholder during their timetabled sessions.
- At the Plenary Session on Friday the stakeholders are invited to nominate a representative to make a contribution of five minutes on their behalf, if they so wish.

Before we get down to work can I again quote from Dr. Geraldine Smith's interpretation of the deeper meaning of the word 'compromise' in relation to promoting ecumenism and pluralism. She states:

Compromise within a purely rights-based worldview will signify, at best, political management of gains and losses, and at worst, moral defeat or victory. But in the quest for what will best contribute to the common good, compromise holds the power to liberate and consolidate across divisions and ancient loyalties and allegiances.

Compromise carries us beyond an individualist solution and holds out the possibility of a new and shared future. Compromise invites us to face one another, to take one another seriously enough to enter not just a contract but a mutual promise that implies, in some way, a taking of responsibility together for the future.

- Ar Aghaidh linn! Agus go n-eirí an t-ádh linn inár gcuid oibre
- And so to work, and may our efforts be crowned with the success to which we aspire.