

Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector

Closing Remarks by Professor Coolahan

24 June 2011

Clock Tower, Department of Education and Skills

As we draw the Discussion Days of the Forum on School Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector to a close I wish, in the first instance, to thank a number of people whose generous assistance has helped to make the days a good organisational success. They tend to work quietly, out of the limelight, but their contributions are vital. We express our thanks to:

Ursula Dunne and **Fidelma Lyons** who were involved in the planning and organising of the 3 days with military precision;

Jason Mc Cabe and **Jason Benson** who helped with the logistics on the days;

Anne Nolan who translated documents both from Irish to English but also English to Irish;

Mags Jordan and **Sarah Miley** who took notes on the proceedings;

Kevin Dermody from HEAnet who is responsible for our live webcast - and to remind you that it will be available on the DES website www.education.ie from late next week;

Mary O'Rourke and Mary Ryan who has provided administrative backup for the Advisory Group and who minds the dedicated email address;

The IT staff of **Ger Losty** and **Stuart Healy** who maintain our webpage on the Department's Website and meet our I.T. needs;

Deirdre Grant and **Sarah Moroney** in the Press Office; and

Oliver Sheedy and his staff who have provided excellent refreshments throughout the three days.

Closing Remarks

We have reached the concluding session of our intensive Discussion Days of the Forum on Primary School Patronage and Pluralism.

I said at the Opening of the Forum that for over fifty years I have felt privileged to be part of the Irish education community. Now, at the end of the forum, this sentiment has been further affirmed by our

engagements over the last three days. We thank you most sincerely for your presence and the quality of your engagement.

I also stated that I was confident that at this forum, participants would sustain the honourable tradition of quality consultative engagements that has been established over the last two decades in Irish education. Again, I am glad to confirm that this has been so. Your contributions have proceeded in exemplary fashion. While there is now general agreement on the issues which face us, the processes to achieve success are difficult, but our discussions over these days should help their resolution.

We graciously thank the fourteen agencies who were full participants in the forum for the quality of their submissions, and for the efforts they made to engage the views of members of their constituencies hence widening the arc of the consultation process. We greatly appreciate the quality of their engagement with the oral process of the forum. The questions before us all are not easy, and the temptation is to avoid the core issues, with more general comment. But, we did not give in to this temptation.

We admire the clear, focussed and articulate way in which delegates responded orally to the questions posed by the Advisory Group. We consider that the question and answer sessions have further clarified

issues, have given added value to the reflection and inquiry process, and have fostered greater mutual understanding of viewpoints and positions.

Unlike other consultative fora, not everybody was present throughout, but the fact that we utilised new technologies to put the submissions on the web in advance, and provided live web-cast of proceedings thus enabling some participants to be in contact from a distance.

As we have just terminated the discussions, it is not possible to convey a satisfactory summary of outcomes. Nevertheless, I think that it is appropriate to record some striking impressions. I think that it is true to say that all here gathered have a realisation of the issues which confront us, and have exhibited a strong commitment and expression of goodwill to work in partnership towards resolution. This is not a once off event, but an incremental process of change, in response to an evolving social change.

The nature of the interchanges emphasised the remarkable richness of the resource of human capital available to us in Ireland within the educational sphere. Throughout our proceedings a high degree of understanding of the issues was in evidence, a clear realisation of the historical elements which have shaped the current patronage framework, an awareness of the

sensitivities involved for people, an acceptance of the priority of parental and children's rights, a grasp of the constitutional legal and international human rights issues involved, an acceptance of the tight economic environment within which issues must be resolved – and, dare I say it – a goodwill, and pro-active stance in evidence towards resolving the issues involved. If we can work together, harness the potential and ingenuity of the partners involved, the momentum is there for us to 'take the tide of opportunity at the flood' towards success.

The Discussion Days are part of a work in progress for the Forum. The 17 hours we have spent in focussed discussion, based on the submissions, provides us with valuable data as we progress. Furthermore, the 200 other valuable written submissions record the contributions of many other citizens, and groups who were not physically present with us. These submissions as well as a range of other cognate reports and relevant research provide us with the raw material to shape a way forward. Hopefully, participants at the forum will learn from the contributions of other delegates, and with an open mind reflect on perspectives which may differ from their own, of other partners' whose bona fides are to be respected.

Many key themes were explored during the Forum's discussions. On accumulation much light has been shone on controversial issues. Concerns were shared by all parties on protecting qualitative aspects of current educational traditions, from both educational and socio-economic perspectives, while moving forward in a well-planned progressive way towards re-shaping some of these traditions.

A heartening emphasis was placed on the recent and contemporary achievements on inclusivity, coping with diversity, and accommodating change – while in no sense being complacent about it, but rather motivated towards its betterment. It appears to me that the well-springs of goodwill are very apparent, and while agencies may be coming at it from different perspectives, there is much more in common between them than differentiates them. There is also a valuable tradition of dialogue and democratic discourse among the patronage partners. As might be expected in a small island, personal relationships and interpersonal discourse can be a very useful lubricant in resolving apparent differences. A mature democracy uses difference as a spur and stimulus for progressive change. Let's tap into these forces, and harness the wealth of intelligence, experience and goodwill towards the constructive compromises for progressive action.

We are a small island, at the periphery of Europe. Economically and socially we are going through one of the worst periods in our history. If some of the international hazards which threaten come to pass, the discussions at the forum, and much else, could be as tráithíni or corks on a tsunami. Let's hope that the worst never happens, but, in the meantime, let's establish priorities for what lies within our own ambit of resolution. Ireland has a distinguished educational tradition and, despite some ill-informed commentary, still has a quality education system. At this crucial time for Irish society, we owe it to the generations who have gone before to rise to the challenge of our times. Among other things we should set about and achieve the resolution of the school patronage and pluralism issue in the Primary Sector with resolution, good planning, and as much consensus as is possible.

Arising from the Forum Discussion Days, the Advisory Group will continue to work into the autumn. We will absorb and reflect on the outcomes of the Forum. We will further consult all written contributions. We will engage in further consultations, and will draw from more research reports and relevant literature.

Using our best wisdom we will prepare an Interim Report which we will present to a Plenary Meeting of the stakeholders. The target date is 17

November 2011, here in the Clock Tower. Following responses at this Plenary Meeting, the Group will prepare a final report for presentation to Minister Quinn, by the end of the year, as originally planned.

As you are aware, the Advisory Group is performing its function as an independent agency. Our report will reflect our best collective wisdom whose sole concern will be what is best for Irish education and society. While independent, we are benefiting from secretarial services made available by the DES, most notably by Ms Breda Naughton, who has been most efficient and committed to our work schedule. We record our most sincere thanks to Breda, who is made of energy.

I would like to record our thanks to the Press for the coverage given to the Forum in the last three days.

On a personal note I would also wish to warmly thank my two colleagues Caroline and Fionnuala, who took on the job with a great sense of civic service, and who have engaged wholeheartedly and most courteously with the process.

Gura fada buan sibh uilig, agus slán abhaile um tráthnóna.