

**THE IRISH NATIONAL
TEACHERS' ORGANISATION**

**ANNUAL NORTHERN CONFERENCE
Friday 6 March 2020**

Northern Secretary's Address
Gerry Murphy
INTO

Welcome to Minister or is that welcome back, welcome too our guests from the wider educational community and finally but certainly not least you the representatives of the broader membership.

The INTO comes together for this Northern Conference every year and we share with you all our observations, concerns and demands. Since 2012 it has been my honour to address you all as Northern Secretary and since 2012, I have attempted on every occasion to be constructive about communicating your views, the members. It has been a considerable struggle at times to do so. However, I firmly believe that positivity and ambition are much more attractive to the listener than negativity and cynicism. Holding out as they do the opportunity for advancement as opposed to resentment and stagnation.

I also share the view that if things are not to your liking then the power to change them rests with you. The great Eddie McArdle, former Registrar of the General Teaching Council NI, introduced me to the writings of Marcus Aurelius when I became Northern Secretary which led me on to other philosopher types and while I won't pretend to understand all of what they have written some things stick in my mind like for example Socrates view on change, he said,

“The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new”.

Let me reassure you I'm not off on a flight of philosophical fancy for the next hour and half..... only joking. But I do want you to keep Socrates in mind as I make this contribution to Conference and hopefully to what will become a wider debate on where education

goes now, we have an Executive again and a Minister restored to Rathgael House.

Minister, in your first contribution to the Education Committee of February 5th upon your restoration to office Minister, you outlined the challenges facing Education and gave some figures as to the funding necessary to bring about the changes you mentioned, for four, of what you characterised as “big ticket items”. You talked about money, the budgets for, capital, recurrent and schools, the associated shortfall and what you needed overall to deliver on the change required. You spoke about the agreement in principle on pay and workload reached with INTO and the other teacher trade unions, last June. You spoke of Childcare and Special Educational Needs, I understand you were presenting for more than one audience and attempting to reflect the fiscal reality against all the myriad demands faced by your Department whilst also opening the bidding on what has turned into a public spending auction.

Buried in that verbiage were real nuggets of encouragement for teachers and reasons to be hopeful for the education system alongside some other things which INTO will seek to have changed and re-imagined. The “turbo charging of area planning” is something we wish to discuss and see changed. Area Planning is something the Department has failed to convince teachers and communities across the north is a positive thing. You say it is not about cost cutting but rather about delivering a quality education. Minister, a quality education can only be delivered by teachers. Teachers who are completely focused on facilitating and leading learning not teachers who are in a limbo of uncertainty awaiting the outcome of what we all know is a largely predetermined consultation process. What I find so disappointing about the whole concept of area planning is if the Executive was really serious about providing a quality education then

the new schools and all the associated resourcing that the process implies would be there ahead of the closures and the moving on to split sites. Minister would you not agree that showing me is better than telling me. You could do this by reviewing and modifying the procurement and planning processes associated with capital builds which would be an efficiency measure bringing real savings. Yes, this will require regulatory and legislative change but, in all likelihood, we are going to need a significant education bill in the medium term anyway. One only has to look at the failure that is the Strule Campus for support for this argument. Another major change I would suggest you consider before charging headlong into a round of closures and amalgamations is that teachers in the affected schools are placed in the new school much earlier in the process. Reduce the uncertainty Minister, reassure the professionals who you are relying on to put Humpty Dumpty together again.

Your comments to the committee on Special Educational Needs on the face of it are not that encouraging as you appear to be accepting that the Special Educational Needs Bill agree prior to the collapse of January 2017 is the solution to all our problems in this area. It seems to us at INTO that this Bill is only about managing a problem and nothing about addressing its causes. It is clear from the schools that the growing numbers of children and young people presenting with SEN will only continue to increase if we don't as a society begin to address the root causes of the uplift in their numbers. This will require a degree of cross departmental working unseen to date by the administration of which you are a key part. The future in this area has to be about co-operation across Departments and between the trade unions and the Departments supported by a realistic budget.

At the heart of the approach outlined in the 2016 Bill was the promotion of inclusion as the central policy around which services were to be arranged. To date Children's and Young Peoples Services has done a great dis-service to what is an excellent concept. Furthermore, by devolving responsibility from the centre, CYPS have sought to make teachers and school leaders the gatekeepers for access to medical and personal care, learning support and life opportunities and all without the resources or funding to do it. It seems Minister there are those more interested in saving money and off-loading liability than delivering for the children and young people affected.

It is in this area that you can see very clearly the damage nearly three years plus of no Ministerial direction has wrought. You indicated to the Committee that shortly the Department would be publishing consultations regarding both the regulatory changes and the proposed Code of Practice. This is a classic example of the stable door slamming after the horse has bolted, CYPS has taken advantage of your absence for the past three years to proceed with changes to SEN provision in advance of the statutory consultations. INTO will, nevertheless, participate in these consultations and I remind you that a submission from INTO carries the weight of 7000 plus members and our contribution should be weighted accordingly. We have very positive suggestions to make and expect they will be given the careful consideration they deserve. The command and control management model is long gone. Minister, the only way we can fix this mess is to work together as partners. CYPS has tried the old way it has failed, you know it, EA knows it, the parents know it and the teachers most certainly do.

INTO members in special schools and increasingly in mainstream schools have seen their work loads and stress levels increased, and

their professionalism has been called into question due to the bungled changes rammed through in this area. Minister if you want our help in fixing this educational and may I suggest political mess you will need to start by listening to the people on the ground who deal with the children and young people with SEN. Spreadsheets and corporate targets are all very well and nice to look at but this about improving the lives of real people not maximising financial returns. You must remember Minister this audience today are the experts at improving the lives of the children and young people in their care.

We at INTO are delighted to see you commit to delivering on a Childcare Strategy and we recognise that it will take time to get the necessary resourcing and infrastructure in place. The provision of 30 hours a week for every child is a noble aim. It is vitally important that every child with access to these hours is accommodated in a nursery school, staffed by trained teachers, in their pre-school year. We recognise that this will require a considerable resource given the woeful under resourcing and neglect experienced by the nursery sector over too many years. But this commitment is vitally important if we are to continue to improve the life chances of the next generation and will go a long way to providing another space and series of opportunities for the department to work with other government departments in the interests of the child at this key time in their development where every additional support can make a real difference over a lifetime. The benefits of a such a step change will transform the lives of not only the children who will benefit directly but their communities too. Socrates would approve of this “building the new”.

The other “big ticket item you mentioned was the agreement in principle reached with INTO and the other teacher trade unions in June of last year. An agreement in principle that took almost two

years two hammer out. We at INTO await with interest your making a formal offer, something these assembled delegates had expected before now. Minister the delay in concluding this business is making our members nervous. We haven't forgotten what happened in 2016 when a previous Peter Weir, withheld the whole 1% cost of living increase in that year, it was, you recall, the straw that broke the camel's back and precipitated the industrial action that is currently ongoing. The agreement in principle needs to translate into a firm offer, our members will then have the opportunity to either accept or reject what will be put before them. And lest we forget what is to be put before them, the agreement in principle, deals with the two years past, the years 2017/18 and 2018/19 only. The members have a right to an offer and expect it be made to them prior to the Easter Holidays which for most schools will begin the week commencing April 6th. This allows time for the London Government to have its budget on or about March 14th, for the Executive to follow shortly thereafter followed by some form of limited consultation to take place with civic society. At that point or before, if possible, we expect to have an offer made to us.

If Minister no offer is forthcoming prior to Easter I will convene as soon as is possible, in my capacity as Chairperson of the NITC, a meeting of that body to plan and co-ordinate an escalation of the industrial action that all five unions are currently engaged in. It is the case Minister that the NITC are united and has already had the necessary preliminary discussions and we as a single unit agree that future action, we may take will involve all five unions and be system wide and co-ordinated. Please don't consider this as a threat. It is entirely in keeping with the way INTO and NITC has conducted itself throughout this dispute. Any reasonable person will accept that we

have been patient, and this patience should not be read as a sign of weakness rather as Chaucer said, “a conquering virtue”.

When our members return to school after Easter should an offer have been made, we will begin the process of balloting which will include information sharing and explanation through a variety of methods. Minister we anticipate this will take up to 6 weeks to complete. The members decision, should it be to accept the agreement will then see us enter a transitional period where changes will be brought about, and training delivered to facilitate the changed working environment. Depending on timescales Minister this transitional period may have to extend into term 1 of the 20/21 year. In parallel we anticipate very quickly getting into negotiation for the cost of living rise due to our members for this academic year and the next. Should the members not accept the proposed agreement then Minister I fear we are in for an even more prolonged and difficult period of industrial relations.

I want to conclude my tuppence worth by returning to the notion of change. On the brink of the American Civil War Abraham Lincoln in a speech speaking about slavery and the need to rid America of it said:

“The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate for the stormy present and future. As our circumstances are new, we must think anew and act anew.”

If I may borrow from this great American President, Minister, you have an opportunity now to both think and act anew, the DUP paper on Education published shortly before the restoration of the Assembly displayed a willingness to do both. There was much in that paper entitled “Reducing the Burden” which we in INTO agree with and would be happy to assist in seeing enacted. Your remarks to the Committee on inspection displayed a willingness to think and act

anew also and we welcome the moving of the inspectorate towards a school improvement agency moving it anywhere, Minister, is better than where it is currently at.

With that sort of an attitude and the good luck to have been blessed with a mechanism in the independent external review of education as described in the new Decade New Approach Deal to give expression to this new thinking and create the climate for new actions then perhaps we are at a turning point. Minister if that is the case then be assured this INTO will let go of the battles of the past and join with you in building the new.