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**Speech to the Irish Association Seminar**

**“A Shared Future for Education”**

**Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2007**

I am very pleased to speak at this seminar today to discuss Sir George Bain’s 240 page report and its relevance, not just to Northern Ireland, but island wide and further afield. “*Schools for the Future*” addresses the effect of 50,000 empty desks within the school estate. Bain makes three broad points. First, that Northern Ireland has too many schools. Second, that the main driver for rationalization isn’t cost savings, but creating “*educationally sustainable*” schools. Third, that school provision should be conceived approved within an Area Planning framework. Also, hinted obliquely, is that ‘sustainability’ might be the best available tool to desegregate our ‘balkanised’ education system.

Wary that Assembly politicians would balk at a tough decision, the Education Minister Maria Eagle rushed to accept ‘Bain’. Future sustainable primary schools will typically require 140 pupils (105 in rural areas), with secondary level schools needing 500 pupils. Anything less and the school should be reviewed. Subsequently, the General Municipal & Boilermakers union, who represent many ancillary staff in schools, published a “hit list” of the 457 schools potentially “under threat”. The GMB list was a crude press stunt, but it highlighted the scale of the proposed rationalism. Notably, it forces consideration of the balance between localism and educational sustainability.

I would like to make three quick points which may, at first glance, seem to have little to do with Bain.

First, we need to consider whether we **over-estimate the effect of schools**. The school choices parents make for their children are seen as a “high stakes” decision, fraught and competitive. This is not something restricted to the well heeled or middle class. I remember

some years ago, parents from the Shankill area would camp outside Belfast Boys Model School to enrol, for fear that their kids would have to go to Mount Gilbert school down the road. So, I would caution against overestimating the degree to which schools can affect performance. There is strong academic consensus that variations in pupil performance are largely (85%) down to factors outside the school – such as culture, parental support, family income, but particularly social class. These are the key determinants of performance. So let’s not over pressurize parents, pupils or schools. Schools matter, for sure – but only a bit. Their contribution is only part of a complex whole.\*

Second, there is now significant **consensus for delaying critical educational decisions**. My union, for instance, has been concerned about supporting any detailed admissions criteria at 11, as we are convinced that this misses the point. For a range of reasons, ATL considers that age 10 or 11 is too young to make career shaping decisions. Parents face a very “high stakes” choice too early in their children’s educational journey. ATL supports the general principle of not closing down options unnecessarily. The 2006 Education Order stressed that critical educational pathways should be at 14 or 16. Logically then, we need transfer mechanisms at 14 (or 16), as well as greater fluidity between schools, and with Colleges.

We have noted that the 2006 BBC Northern Ireland poll, and successive Northern Ireland *Life & Times* surveys since 2003 have shown a range of 63% to 68% in favour of delaying Transfer to 14 – inclusive of both those who favour selection and those who don’t. ATL strongly believes that delaying critical “pathways” decisions to 14 can create common ground in this debate.

Third, there is considerable evidence, and international academic consensus, that improvements in overall performance are best achieved in schools with **socially balanced intakes**. I have given a long list references on this point as there are some groups and vested interests in Northern Ireland determined not to follow the considerable evidence on this.

In schools with mixed intakes pupils learn about each other; they see different dispositions to learning; they recognize each others' skills – and those pupils who suffer the most deprivation and exclusion see that education can provide them with the skills and knowledge to make a different life for themselves. For the most disadvantaged young people, the most important role model is someone who looks like them, who is their age, but who has different attitudes to learning and different aspirations for life. So, if we are really to make a difference, if standards really are to rise for all, we need schools which are **socially mixed**, in which peer group pressure can be used effectively to open minds, change outlooks and raise aspirations. The Shared Future is not just about communal division, it's about class too – and the development of a "shared" future within a society much more at ease with itself.

#### **And so to Bain.**

Achieving balanced intakes, both in terms of ability and in social class, is not easily achieved, particularly in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is a largely rural community with a high proportion of small, sectorally balkanised schools. It can only be achieved by having **larger schools**, with a more collegiate approach to inter school collaboration, and a "hands on" and interventionist Government policy. Crudely put, we need schools with catchment areas that take in middle class and working class areas. And we need social engineering schemes to incentivise schools to take quotas of kids entitled to Free School Meals. We don't like social engineering in Northern Ireland, but we do it in employment, so why not schools. The difficulties are that the less popular schools – the schools likely to close - are in poorer areas. Working class communities will lose out on school facilities. The least mobile will travel more;

the poorest will pay out more to access schooling.

Equally, delaying educational choices may mean more "Junior High" or "middle" schools. ATL has been a long time proponent of transfer at 14, and we are very interested in the three phase model that used to be New Labour policy, currently propogated by Catholic education – 0-7, 7-14, and 14+. Seeking balanced intakes, and delaying educational choices to 14 and 16 – both educationally sound - will have implications for the school estate.

#### **Area Planning - Localism Vs Sustainability**

One of the big areas in Bain s the concept of **area planning**. I know, from many years as an elected councillor, that area planning isn't a concept that can long hold peoples imagination. So let me highlight the types of quandary we face with a real, live example.

In North Antrim, the Catholic Maintained sector has recommended closing St Comgall's, Larne and St Aloysius's, Cushendall, amalgamating these schools at St McNissi's, Garron Tower, in Carnlough – a beautiful location some 18 miles from Larne.

I should say that the strategic planning and foresight within Catholic education (albeit concentrated within one sector) is significantly in advance of the thinking of any other sector at this stage. From the perspective of Catholic education, the North Antrim decision is entirely rational. **For community relations in Larne, however, the decision stinks**. The decision has caused real concerns amongst the Catholic community in Larne, which has withstood significant attack from sectarian paramilitarism. It has also raised concerns amongst all main Protestant political groupings, who can see the significant local community relations impacts. Area based planning, therefore, could be a **future check on vested interests**. In Larne's case, an enhancement of existing, low key, cross sectoral, curriculum collaboration could be healthier for the town's social cohesion.

Equally, area based planning needs to take account of more than educational interests. **It is a scandal that schools – sitting in the middle of communities – remain closed in the**

### **evenings, at weekends and at holiday time.**

Valuable assets, far from being “sweated” to community benefit, lie determinedly shut. Area planning needs to involve local representatives and should tackle this, particularly in the disadvantaged areas that are likely to lose a secondary school, but retain a primary school. The new Councils will have responsibility for statutory area planning, and planning determination – as well as for community relations, sports, arts and play funding – all key to other Government initiatives such as Extended Schools.

So, much as my union would broadly support Bain – and in particular that **savings in over-provision should be redirected to the classroom** - in our drive for efficiency we need to be careful to enhance the attachment of schools to neighbourhood, and locality.

### **Collaboration and the Economy**

Another broad brush stroke within ‘Bain’ is the encouragement of more collaboration. This is a particular requirement in implementing a broad 24/27 curriculum envisaged under the 2006 Education Act. This aims not only for a broader curriculum inclusive of academic, technical and vocational balance, it also seeks to provide the skills and personal attributes that the employer organisations keep repeating that they need.

The Northern Ireland economy cannot any longer be described as productive. We produce, manufacture, grow, extract and mine very little. Our economy is dependant on Treasury transfers and the public sector, fuelled by easy credit, vacuous consumerism and by a housing market bubble. **We are not remotely productive.**

It is agreed generally that we should not try and compete on a low skill equilibrium of low wages, low costs, low value added. However, if we are to compete at the “value added” high skill end, we need an education system to help produce not just the knowledge, but the **attributes that will assist economic productivity** – the attributes of communication, working in teams, resourcefulness, creativity, and initiative. A broadened, vocationally orientated curriculum does need schools of sufficient size, sufficient critical mass, to offer the range of options, particularly post 14. It also requires collaboration. Bain has noted that the “bums on

seats” funding formula presently in existence tend to blunt collaboration and exacerbate what I would call stupid competition. A funding mechanism that incentives sharing resources and collaboration is urgently needed. The concept of open enrolment makes this inter school competition more acute.

Collaboration, too, is difficult. Take another example - the projected new Irish medium *Gaelscoil Éanna* in the Hightown area of Glengormley. With a thriving nursery this new school met the official Government starting enrollment threshold. In the post Bain environment, the Minister has rejected funding. The school is determined to open anyway and may legally challenge the decision. However, what is impressive about this school is the **collective** nature of the endeavour. The *Gaelscoil* was intimately associated with neighbourhood. From a teaching union perspective, it demonstrates all the enthusiasm, vigour and parental drive that best supports teachers’ efforts.

Now, the mechanism hinted at within Bain is the Irish medium schools could exist sustainably as units within larger English medium schools. As a former member of the North Eastern Board, with a background in supporting Integrated schools, and with considerable local contacts as a long serving local councillor in that area, I sought to test whether *Gaelscoil Éanna* could be “immersed” or “integrated” as a unit within 4 nearby schools – one Catholic, one Controlled Integrated (NEELB), one grant maintained Integrated and one Board school. For varying and genuine reasons none could or would accommodate an Irish medium unit. None were going to be convinced otherwise.

### **Markets in Education**

The Bain agenda, and collaboration will also be undermined by continued moves to “marketise” education. Markets may be good for many things – but not for education. Markets always produce some winners and more losers.

The general movement towards what New Labour calls “contestability” will undermine the desired movement towards collaboration. “Contestability” is the ideological notion that public services work most efficiently when there

is competition for contracts or services – where public services are “contested”

Northern Ireland has, to a degree, been sheltered from the worst excesses of contestability evident in Great Britain.

On one hand, a concerted collaboration, between schools and Colleges, is required to deliver the breadth of the pupil entitlement. On the other, the ‘contestability’ theme promotes damaging, time consuming, bidding scrambles for extended schools or specialist schools funding. Equally, in the re-organisation of the school estate, at a time of maximum institutional uncertainty, it is ludicrous to lock schools into facility management contracts of up to 30 years. In building and managing the school estate, the “contestability” agenda represents poor value for money and can only hinder collaboration.

The Strategic Investment Board’s PFI / PPP style procurement diverts resources from the classroom and impinges significantly on the time of professional teaching staff and on their control

over their environment. And it is interesting that in England, the parts of the education landscape that are free to reject the PFI approach (private schools and the business orientated Academies), reject it with great alacrity.

Market forces will also work against the interests of disadvantaged groups. Where “choice” is the driving force, we always see the disadvantaged lose out. The Government should stick to its original mantra which was, if you can remember back to 1997, **standards not structures**.

George Bain has synthesised the key issues well. It is a good road map, but the devil is in the detail. A shared future in education needs to have social sharing, social justice at its heart. The implementation will be a challenge to us all.

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#### On School Improvement: Schools Matter, but only a bit!

School improvement was as much a grass roots movement as a Government policy, but it provided support for two policy themes. First, that autonomous schools could produce better pupil performance. Second, it rejected the apparent determinism which explained pupil failure in terms of social factors, as summed up by the Labour Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett – ‘poverty no excuse’. Whilst fatalism and low expectations were, and possibly remain, a feature of some schools, it seemed by the mid-nineties that the pendulum of rhetoric had swung excessively, leading to the title Schools making a difference: let’s be realistic (Thrupp, 1999), and ‘... improvement methods would make a difference.’ (Johnson, 1999, p.166) Limitations on the utility of the school improvement model became clear (Mortimore, 1998, MacGilchrist this vol.).

One was the reliance on high quality leadership and management, when there was continuing concern about that quality which led to the establishment of a National College for School Leadership. The second was the recognition that school improvement placed heavy demands on a workforce already feeling overstretched. Thirdly, improvement research corroborated earlier findings (Coleman et al 1966, Hanushek 1992) and showed that 85% of the variation in pupil performance is due to factors external to the school (Teddlie and Reynolds 2000).

**Of the remaining 15%, the classroom effect was shown to be the most substantial.** This finding coincided with the determination of the Labour Government elected in 1997 to move to the third phase of reform, a programme to develop the teaching force and the quality of pedagogy.”

