

Baroness May Blood: ATL Annual Lecture
19 May 2006, Europa Hotel, Belfast



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Introduction

From **Mark Langhammer**, Director, Association of Teacher and Lecturers, Northern Ireland.

President, General Secretary, Ladies and Gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to introduce our speaker for this evening's ATL Lecture. I first got to know May Blood fifteen or so years ago when she spoke to a group I was working for in Rathcoole – to advise us on Early Years developments underway within the Greater Shankill's EU Urban programme. I think the Reverend Bobby Allen, a Presbyterian Minister who was a bit of a legend in Rathcoole, had invited May – and had grown up with May in the Roden Street area. May Blood worked for more than thirty years in the mills on the Upper Crumlin Road and spent much of that time as a shop steward and representative with the Transport & General Workers Union. I heard May recently on the Kelly show say that she received her education through the trade union movement. May has been well known for her work in the Early Years Project and in community work generally within the Greater Shankill area. I'm aware of her work within Impact Training, a well run training organisation on Lanark Way. She has been a champion and fundraiser for Integrated Education, and more recently she has worked positively on a range of issues within the House of Lords – invariably for the underdogs – the "*have nots*". Can you please give a warm welcome to Baroness May Blood.

The ATL Annual Lecture, 2006 **Baroness May Blood**

Thank you very much Mark, and thank you for the invitation - although I have to say I stand in front of you extremely nervous, amongst all you well educated people! However I will do my best to try and give you some of my thoughts on education in Northern Ireland, particularly from the perspective of where I come from.

As Mark was saying I was born in the shadow of the Royal Victoria Hospital into what, by today's standards, would be known as a 'poor' family. And just to annoy my professional friends, I very often say that we were poor, but we didn't know we were poor because we had no social workers to tell us!

I was born into quite a large family. There were seven of us, and mum and dad, in a little "two up, two down" My brother and sisters ahead of me all had a primary or secondary school education and my sisters worked in the mill. My brothers worked in the shipyard where my father worked, and my mother was a cook. My younger sister wasn't born at this stage when I had done the 11+ my family had great hopes that one in the family would at least "*make something of themselves*" as we used to say. And I remember doing the 11+ - and I was saying this to Bob McCartney recently (because Bob McCartney also quite often refers to when he did the 11+ on the Shankill) – and quite honestly I can't remember it being a big deal. As far as my parents were

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concerned, it was just another exam. When I came home and said that I was doing this exam, it was *“OK, so you’re doing this exam.”*

I had a wonderful teacher, Mr Drummond, who took a great interest in us. There was 37 in our class and 33 of us took the 11+. I passed it, and I wanted to be a school teacher, but my dad wanted me to learn languages. He wanted me to go to Grosvenor High School. I said *“No, if I can’t be a school teacher...”* - I wanted to go into Methody and then onto Stranmillis *“if I can’t do that, I’m not going anywhere”*. I went to a little school in Sandy Row which in those days was known as Linfield Secondary School and wasted the next four years of my life.

Now the reason I am telling you this is that I was talking to a gentlemen at lunch hour and he was telling me the angst both he and his wife went through putting their child through the 11+ this year - how they had got him extra tuition and that they both nearly had a nervous breakdown and I said *“Why?”* Well he said that they were determined the boy would get an “A” Now that’s the pressure that is on some children. The child got an “A” and he was following in his father’s footsteps. At any rate, I would just like to take a little while to talk to you about what I see within Northern Ireland.

When we are in Northern Ireland we are told that things are good, that the future of Northern Ireland is bright - that if you’d been here 10 years ago you would hardly recognise the place. When I was speaking to Americans ten or twelve years ago this place (the city centre) would have been shut down at this time of the night. There would have been no buses on the road and Northern Ireland came to a full halt before 7.00 at night. And of course we all know the difference that the Agreement and the absence of violence has meant to our community.

There are great myths about Northern Ireland, however, and just for a brief time tonight I want to talk about four of them.

Firstly, **regeneration**. As I already said, if you came back to Northern Ireland not having been here for a number of years you would probably say that Belfast is looking very well. The buildings are looking exceptionally well and as I travel around the country you can see there is a lot of good stuff going. But the interesting thing is that it masks segregation - because now you will find that segregation is worse than it was ten or twelve years ago.

People have retreated into their own communities. Now I’m not just talking about the working class, I’m talking about the middle class too – where difference is probably tolerated, but not really talked about. So in one sense regeneration has been good, its been good for Northern Ireland but we still have a very, very big, a major problem, with segregation. The interesting thing about the European peace money that came in is that it was focussed mainly on trying to address the segregation issue. I was involved in handing out some *tranches* of PEACE 1 money, which worked to bring people together. I sit on the British/Irish Parliamentary Board body and I said there I can remember when PEACE 1 was being given out the distribution

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mechanisms were very clever. We had to have 18 (intermediary funding) groups in Northern Ireland and every one of these groups had to reflect the community. There had to be at least 33% female representation within each of these groups. We had two groups that came back to us who said "We can't get women to go onto this committee" So the Chairman said "Well, if you can't get women to go onto the committee you can't have the money". Within a week they had women on the committee! And it's wonderful you know - nothing sharpens your mind like a hanging.

PEACE 1 worked very well in bringing communities together, and in those days I saw the DUP and Sinn Fein sitting around the table. I saw the DUP proposing something and SF seconding it and the PEACE 1 money rolled out. PEACE 2 went in a different direction. In fact if you look around today, and while there has been all that money coming in to Northern Ireland, we are still a very deeply segregated community. People very often just retreat into their own communities. Particularly in ghettos, people don't want to know what's happening on the other side - other than when I am working on the Shankill I am told "See them 'uns over there they get everything!" and when I work on the Catholic side of the peaceline I get "See them Protestants, they don't even need to ask!" We all know that none of those two things are true.

I know that Mary (Bousted) this evening has been referring to the enormous change that is going to happen to Northern Ireland within the Review of Public Administration and with the setting up of the Education and Skills Authority. There are great changes in the post part of this "tough love" Now, if all these changes take place in Northern Ireland we are really in for tough love. Northern Ireland has become very settled in its way and we don't really take too well to change here – we like to do things at our own pace. If you look at the changes that are going to take place, certainly the effect on regeneration could primary sector. Our Secretary of State has told us that it's cause us an enormous problem.

The second thing I would like to talk about and that is **employment** – there's another myth in Northern Ireland. We're told that the **unemployment** has gone down to single figures for the first time ever, but that masks that most of the jobs are in the public sector. And if all of the things that the SOS says about "tough love" happen - then we are going to have thousands of people unemployed and we will go back to unemployment being sky high.

I read this in a *Management Today* article which came out on the 1st March:

"In it's hey day between the First and Second World wars Harland & Wolff - the shipbuilders, where the giant crane still dominates the city's skyline. provided work for nearly 35,000 people Two years ago after it had completed construction of a roll-on roll-off ferry, Harland and Wolff applied for membership of the Northern Ireland Federation of Small Businesses. It's workforce has shrunk to below 150. Now Harland & Wolff has applied for membership of the Fedration of Small Businesses!"

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Now when you think about that. Within a very short time from 35,000 jobs - and now we're down to less than 150 with shipbuilding at an end. The company has sought to reinvent itself as a "high-tech" engineering company. In October (2005) the old shipyards took another step towards oblivion when a billion pound regeneration plan was unveiled for the Belfast "Titanic" Quarter. Last year in NI we received £5 billion or more from the British Government – over and above what we had contributed. That has been going on, year after year, since the Peace process and before. When the RPA kicks in, I wonder where that money will be, and how we will survive without it? We have one of the poorest regions in the UK.

We have to think about all these things, and I think if we go into this new era we could be in for really hard times. The whole myth about high employment and that Belfast is doing so well is a wonderful idea. I very often say in the Shankill when I'm talking to visitors – that what starts off as a rumour in Peters Hill by the time it gets to Woodvale Park it's a sworn affidavit. And that's the way we are in Northern Ireland. When somebody tells you something by the time you've left the building it's written in stone. I think NI has a lot of growing up to do as we go to go into this "tough love" scenario.

The third thing we need to look at is **politics**. We hear a lot about politics, we hear a lot about our MLA's, about our elected people in Westminster but in the last election there were a lot of people concerned at Westminster that the election had gone to the two extremes, DUP and Sinn Fein, getting the largest vote. But even in politics it masks ordinary peoples' thinking. As I travel around Northern Ireland I'm deeply convinced that the majority of people want an Assembly up; they want our own assembly working; they want us to be able to have our own ministers, from wherever they come and they want us to work towards that.

In the short time that the Assembly actually did work, it worked very well. If we are going to go into this whole new change set out by the Secretary of State, we've got to move to get a settlement. Again, even though you speak to people and they want an assembly the one over-riding factor in Northern Ireland is the apathy there is around politics. If you're wise and you speak to someone on the Shankill and ask "*Well what do you think about direct rule or would you rather have the assembly?*" and this guy said to me "*Well I really don't care who signs my giro as long as it falls through the door!*"

Hopefully we're growing a whole new generation. What really interests me particularly within integrated education – is that you begin to see young people taking an interest in politics and in all kind of issues, and that might be a way forward for us.

The final thing I want to particularly speak to you tonight, and one that you are probably most interested in, is **education**.

I am told that Mr Paisley wrote this "*the educational success in NI has been one of the Province's key selling points. Throughout decades of terrorism the public has consistently demonstrated their support for post primary education which offers a variety of provision and selects pupils for appropriate schools on the basis of their educational needs and academic ability. The fact that*

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academic excellence is available to all – the door of the grammar schools is open to everyone in the province. However, despite excellent exam results, in the province, there are undoubtedly areas for improvement. We have highlighted this issue and the need to enhance the qualifications of those not so academically gifted, particularly children in areas of deprivation. Here's a contradiction he says "on one hand there is this problem but it is through this process of academic selection acting as a leveller, that we give these young people the best opportunity of succeeding,"

Now that is my experience on the ground, I have to say to you. My experience on the ground is that we are told that Northern Ireland has the best education in the world! And I've heard Tony (Gallagher) speaking on this many times. It might be a good education system for 35% of our kids but what do you do with the other 65%?

On the Shankill this year we had some 200 children who sat the 11+. Principals from the Shankill particularly won't tell you how many passed – they're quite protective – but with a little information here and there I discovered there was roughly 200. And from those 200, 10 got 'A's'. What's wrong on the Shankill, what's the problem? Are the children thick?

Let me give you an example. Fifteen years ago, when we started to work on the Early Years programme on the Shankill, I have to say at that time I was convinced that the only way out of the ghetto for kids was the 11+. I thought "*Perhaps if we could get them through the system and see a brighter new world*". We had done some research to find why parents were not putting their children in for the 11+ and it wasn't that the children were thick, or that they couldn't do the exam. It was simply that their parents couldn't afford it. There was the whole social standing because if you go to a grammar school you have to get your uniform in a certain shop and everything that goes with a grammar school education. And of course there is the 'voluntary' contribution to the school. At that time it was £85 and some schools were asking for a lot more than that. It came in the form of an invoice! And if you didn't pay the invoice you got a solicitors letter! I know many parents that we worked with who put their kids into the 11+ and went on to an academic school were *through with it* in a year because they simply couldn't afford it.

Now we have got the Lawlor Trust in England – Jackie Redpath (Director of the Greater Shankill Partnership) got involved with this – to support parents who wanted to put their children through a grammar school education. And they came on board with five years finance, after meeting a family and ensuring that their case was genuine. We had a number of children that went through that way. Some of these children, coming from the Shankill - and I make no apologies saying this - they were bullied. "*You're from the Shankill, you're thick, you couldn't possibly know this*". Parents and children retreated back into their own areas. Some 70% of the parents are single parents, male and female. I chair a training organisation on the Shankill, Impact Training and we deal with 16 – 18 year olds – 30% of the 16 year olds that come to us can't even read or write. They can't even write their own name. But a more frightening trend is that many of the young people that leave school at 16 are

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never heard of again! Because they can't read or write, they won't go into the DHSS and read the forms and sign. They don't sign on. Where do they go? They go to the Paramilitaries and the paramilitaries have the natural flow of young people coming into their coffers. After all, you don't need an education to be a paramilitary. You just need to be a thug.

So you know all these problems are with us. We are being told constantly that we have the best education system in the world. This week over in Westminster I spoke to a number of peers who are absolutely convinced that we have the best system in the world and why would we ever want to change it. Trying to convince them that this is not the real picture is difficult. There are kids that do well on the Shankill Road, don't get me wrong. Out of my own close circle of friends I know three children this year that went on to Queen's University - one through the integrated movement and two through the grammar school and then on to Queen's. One studied accountancy, one forensic medicine and the other IT. There are children doing well but the numbers are so low it is almost impossible to know where they are and how to count them. So in my opinion education is probably the biggest mask we carry here in NI.

We go about and tell people we have a wonderful education system. The grammar lobby tells everybody. Bob McCartney quotes that he was a working class lad from the Shankill, that he did the 11+ in his day. In my day you had a choice. If you failed the 11+ you could go on to be an apprentice and you knew - with manufacturing thriving - that was open in my day. Young fellas were released one day a week or one night a week to the local technical college to learn their skills. That's all gone. We'd be living in fairyland to think that's still there. It's not, and if kids don't get a proper education, where do they go and what do they do? Here in Northern Ireland you seem to need at least 3 GCSE's to be a porter in the railway! I'm talking about young people who can't read or write, and the frightening fact about it is that most of them are already parents, now what hope is there for the next generation.

So it's how we work through that, particularly in Protestant areas. We have a major problem with education that's historical because unemployment came late to the protestant community. There was no need for an education. And now in the Protestant community, we are almost seeing generational unemployment and you hear now what I used to hear in the Catholic community in the 1960's - "*Sure my father never worked, and my grandfather never worked. Why would I look for a job?*". This new Education Order is coming in and you guys are the power behind this. If you think this a good deal, then we have to press forward with it.

The one thing I really, really want to see in Northern Ireland is an education that respects all ability that there is an equality of ability. Let me tell you a story. In 1990 I ran a project for long-term unemployed. Men of 18+ came in and they were all in the paramilitaries, they all had police records, some dabbled in drugs. I arranged a football match between them and another group and I was absolutely amazed that all these guys had scars on the same place on their knees. I couldn't understand why but I was told "*Grow up and*

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act your age!" I ran that project and those guys had been absolute failures, had been put out of the system as failures and yet those guys had wonderful skills in making wooden furniture. To tell them when they had made a piece of play furniture and that it looked well - we used to send them out to schools do work, - and the very fact that the principal praised them - they were about 10 feet tall when they came back. We gave them confidence, worked with them one-one, gave them the ability to read and write and look for jobs and I'm proud of the fact that it was very successful. It was so successful that the government closed us down! Closed because they said it wasn't proper training, that everybody wasn't getting little bits of paper at the end of the year to say they had passed this or that. I was more interested in getting them out of bed! Showing them there is a skill in life, you get up, you do work and you go home and you're tired and you go to bed. These guys did it the other way round. It was trying to get them engaged; convinced that they had a talent - and I'm rather proud of the fact that many of them did well. In fact two of them now own their own businesses. We have to work at that level if we are going to make Northern Ireland the place we would like it to be.

I know there are a lot of empty school places. I know there are the 50,000 spare seats that we hear about. It's probably nearer 80,000 now. I know that system has all got to be rationalised. That's not up to the like of me - that's up to the system. I said to Angela Smith when she was the Education Minister and talking about the young people that couldn't read or write and I said the system is failing these young people. Just because they didn't go in for the 11+ shouldn't be the end of it. Take one particular school I know. I had American visitors up one day and these lads were outside and I said to the principal "*should they not be at school?*" "*No*" she said "*they are troublemakers so we have to keep them outside the gate*". There is still a lot of things we have to take care of in Northern Ireland.

As Mark said, my passion in life is integrated education. And of course, it is all ability and we bring children in from all ages - those who pass the 11+ and those who haven't - and we have children who passed the 11+ and choose to go to integrated schools. But nonetheless we have to change the system. The system cannot be working effectively no matter what the grammar part of the system says. And it's a class issue, it's not about ability. If you look into it, you climb the ladder you do the 11+ you go down the academic route, get this great qualification and all of a sudden you become middle class. And the grammar school intakes are largely middle class. Someone asked me recently had I a problem with the grammar system? "*No*" I said, because if you decide to go to grammar school I think that's your right but I do want the kids on the Shankill, the Lower Falls, the Short Strand to have the same opportunities. They mightn't all want to go to university but they all need a good education. For the many parents that are in this room tonight, when you have a child your big wish is that your child will have good health - you've no control over that, but the one thing the parent can give a child is the basis for a good education. That follows them all their life. I left school with no qualifications. The only qualification I left school at 14 with was - the school principal told me I was a 'hussy' - and believe it or not I actually thought that was a compliment. I came home and told my mother and she went ballistic!

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All my life that has followed me. Yes I got a good lot of my education through the trade union movement. Thank God for it, but as I sit in the House of Lords I am very aware of my lack of education. I have no problem with debates but very aware of the Orders coming up for Northern Ireland and the nitty gritty of it I depend on people like Tony and Mark to steer me in the right direction. I don't understand it because I'm not academically minded, but we do have to try the best for the children of Northern Ireland. If all these changes are going to happen, if this 'tough love' is going to come in, then this is what we need to do.

I just want to finish with this – education should not be a political football. What we have to do is try and build a secure education system that will turn out skilled young people at the end - who will be able to take that education with them all their life.

I want to finish with this word change. Change has 6 elements in it: it's a **challenge** and it's a challenge for you guys to see what is the best way to roll out this Order. To have the equality of opportunity. And it's **hard work** Change is not easy. It has to be by **agreement**. You have to get people on board if the grammar lobby can shout then we have to shout too. It has to be about **networking** – parents on the ground don't understand it – they are being told this change is not good. They know the 11+ has been around for a long time You can take it or leave it - that's the end of the story - and they don't know what this new Order is going to bring in and they are fearful of it.

Change is about **grasping** opportunity. We have a real opportunity here, to change at least one myth in Northern Ireland and make it a reality. And I hope at the end of it all we come out of it as a community that has **evolved**, a much better community for our young people in particular, because I could stand here tonight and tell you story after story (and I'll not bore you about it) but education is the key to most things we have to do and certainly you people have the power to make that change for young people.

Thank you very much