

Address by

Kevin Callinan

Deputy General Secretary

at the

IMPACT

Education Division Conference

Galway

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Minister, we are honoured with your presence here today.

We see it as an important acknowledgement of those education workers who are often neglected. Such as the administrative staff who hold the entire system together; such as the secretaries who ensure that our schools run smoothly; such as the special needs assistants who provide the care that allows so many children to access education and to reach their potential.

We see it too as an important recognition of IMPACT's role in the sector. Less than three years ago we established an Education Division to better serve our members. At a time of significant contraction in public sector employment I am pleased to say that our Education Division has gone from strength to strength steadily increasing our membership. We have invested in the sector and will continue to do so. We are in the process of recruiting another Organiser, kindly co-funded by our Institutes of Technology Branch.

Our success is largely due to a great team. Dedicated staff, a coherent Divisional Executive that provides strong national direction and branch leaders that give selflessly in the interests of members and the services they provide. Superb people who collectively see that their job – and the job of the union – is more than pursuing a narrow vocational interest. It is about the big picture too. That is what makes IMPACT different. That is how IMPACT tries to make a difference. And that is why we are particularly

proud of IMPACT's achievements.

Tomorrow we will hear from Tom Healy of the Nevin Economic Research Institute. He will be talking about work that NERI has been doing on a post-recession vision for Ireland. We look forward to hearing what Tom has to say. But, Minister, can I say that at the top of the list should be the elimination of hunger in our schools! The scandal of food poverty should not be acceptable now or in the future.

Since our last conference two years ago we have been trying to work on a number of broad policy issues – food poverty in schools, mental health in schools and colleges and the role of the arts in education. I am sad to say that each of these topics had two things in common – there were a number of government departments involved; and no one department was prepared to take a lead role in a way that would make a real difference. Our post-crisis vision must include a fresh approach to government that overcomes the paralysis that often bedevils issues that cross departments. All political parties please take note.

When I first addressed an SNA meeting a few years ago I was approached afterwards by a member. She said that the biggest issue wasn't money; it wasn't conditions; it was respect. I took that message on board. It may be a simple statement but the society that properly respects and cherishes its most vulnerable children, such as those with special education needs, is the society that should also respect its workers. They are two sides of the same coin.

That is why it is somewhat ironic, but entirely unacceptable, that SNAs who provide this vital caring role can often still be expected in some schools to perform completely inappropriate tasks. And whatever about the actions of individual schools, as a body SNAs are entitled to the application of the same principles regarding the protection of working time and income as other public servants covered by the Haddington Road Agreement.

Another group that experience a form of 'apartheid' is that one comprising school secretaries, caretakers and ancillary staff whose employment is dependent on grant funding. There is no common pay scale and many are very poorly treated. The application of the FEMPI pay cut to these workers gave the lie to any idea that they are not public servants. To suggest otherwise is all the more ridiculous in circumstances where some of their counterparts enjoy public service pay and conditions. The righting of this wrong has been a long standing goal of this union. The injustice was recognised in the past by your colleagues and we will be counting on your support to begin the process of remedying it in the anticipated public service pay talks.

We note the government's intention to publish a 'spring economic statement' later this month. Apparently this will set out a fiscal plan for the period leading into the election and the years beyond it. Let us take the opportunity, Minister, to remind you as a member of that government that the fiscal adjustment that took place was comprised of three elements. Reductions in current and capital

expenditure; increases in taxes and other charges; and cuts in the public service pay and pensions bill. Workers have a legitimate expectation that economic recovery will be based on measures that address each of these three elements. Our job in IMPACT is to make sure that public servants are not forgotten and that the process of income recovery gets underway. So we welcome the government's signal that talks will shortly begin and we eagerly await the outcome – one which should not be assumed to be a foregone conclusion.

Of course it is clear now that austerity fatigue has set in – even with the ECB itself as they pursue their own version of quantitative easing – and that a wage stimulus is required across the economy despite protestations from some employer organisations. Already we have seen pay settlements in many parts of the private sector. We welcome these wholeheartedly. But the government too must do its bit to help create the virtuous circle of increased domestic demand, better economic performance, business expansion, higher tax revenues and better living standards. Minister, to a backdrop of a growing population and increasing demand for public services this country experienced a financial catastrophe. Against fearsome odds and in the face of daily challenges public servants by and large maintained services in a way that protected the social fabric. Now they expect this government to recognise that reality in a tangible way.

We know that economic recovery is vulnerable. We know

that it will not happen overnight. But we also know that the Irish economic collapse was compounded by the decision to socialise huge amounts of corporate and banking debt. Our approach to the post-crisis future must seek to overcome unfair budgetary restrictions and unreasonable debt repayment schedules. It must focus on the creation of a society that is more equal, an economy that is more competitive and a workforce that is more productive. Education is key to this.

All the evidence points to the greatest return an investment in education coming from early years. We have to start there. But this is too important to be left to the privateers and the profiteers. It must be public service led with genuine commitments to the expansion of public provision and the operation of facilities with properly trained and qualified staff employed on agreed pay and conditions. We have to avoid the 'get rich quick' philosophy of the celtic tiger era where the motives of business, often multinational corporations, took precedence over the interests of citizens. We are delighted that Marian Quinn of the Association of Childhood Professionals will speak here later this morning and we look forward to working with ACP in the future to ensure that early childhood, and the professionals working in the field, get proper recognition.

Towards the other end of the spectrum our members in Education and Training Boards and Institutes of Technology are looking forward to a relaxation of the recruitment embargo to relieve intolerable work pressures.

But, Minister, what they will not accept are the attempts by management to randomly designate positions as specialist in order to avoid the normal rules for filling promotional posts. Our members have stuck with their careers through thick and thin – mostly thin, especially in recent years – and IMPACT will not now tolerate a situation that seeks to impede career progression. It is simply not on.

In the case of ETBs the scale of change has been unprecedented. The legislation that gave effect to the merging of VECs was swiftly followed by that which created SOLAS and transferred certain former FAS staff and functions to it and to the ETBs themselves. Our members have cooperated with this on top of the broader public service changes that have taken place. But their expectation was – and remains – that the ETBs would perform a substantial role as a local education authority with commensurate organisational structures and staffing arrangements. We have agreed to the recent Labour Relations Commission proposal on that basis but the process must respect the need for an ambitious role for ETBs and recognise the contribution that our members can make.

We have embraced the merger process that is taking place in some of our IoTs and are open to the possibilities that technological universities may offer. There is genuine concern, however, that the traditional mission of regional technical colleges, with its local focus, should not be lost completely. It is essential that there is good integration with

broader industrial policy so that employment prospects for graduates are maximised and that regional development is to the fore. From our discussions with the Danish management and unions who have already overseen a similar radical overhaul of third level colleges it is imperative that a real partnership between the two sides is pursued. This type of social dialogue is taken as the norm in Denmark and the benefits are evident. Differences between unions are ironed out before discussion with management. While this might prove a challenge in an Irish context – at least initially – the prize is a real say and true influence on how things operate.

The quality of jobs is the issue of the moment. We salute the Dunnes workers who took strike action last Thursday. We salute the Dunnes Stores workers who are uniting the trade union movement in a way not seen for years. We have echoes of their struggle in our own current battle against casualisation of SNAs and the plight of schools staff who are reliant on grant funding. So there is a challenge for Government too in its role as an employer. As the old Labour song says “which side are you on boys, which side are you on?”

Last September we had the blatant attempt by scores of schools to displace jobs, or potential jobs, through the use – or misuse – of JobBridge. Later today we will hear from Dr Mary Murphy of NUI Maynooth. She will update us on the research we commissioned her to do in relation to this labour activation scheme. What she has produced is a plan

to reframe, restrict and resize Irish internship policy. It includes a recommendation that internships should not be allowed in the public sector until such time that there is full staffing and no recruitment moratorium. Minister, when the report is formally launched next Monday we ask that you and your Cabinet colleagues engage with IMPACT to discuss what we believe will be an important proposal for a positive change of direction for internships.

Ensuring that our children remain in education is vital. Your own Department's report on the retention rates of pupils in second level schools examined the cohort that began the first year of the Junior Cycle in 2008. The proportion of early school leavers in Ireland in 2013 at 8.4% compares favourably to the EU 28 average of 12%. This achievement is due in no small measure to the work of the staff of the School Completion Programme. Yet SCP has faced cut after cut in recent years and its very viability is even in doubt. We know that you value SCP and see its importance especially in the context of the DEIS scheme. But we need you to increase the Department's effort to secure these critical projects.

Minister, you may not be aware that IMPACT provided the funding that led to the establishment of the Congress Youth Connect programme. Transition year students learn about the world of work and the role of trade unions. The programme is delivered by champions all of whom are qualified teachers. As part of the project for the past two years schools were invited to submit a short video for the

Decent Work Awards. Last month the biggest screen in Dublin Savoy's cinema was packed as the nominees were announced and the winners revealed in an 'Oscars style' ceremony. The atmosphere was electric. It was an important introduction to collective values and action for these young people.

For us in IMPACT trade unionism is also about quality of life. That is why we followed up the session on mental health at our last Divisional Conference with workshops and with the publication and distribution of 'Headspace' a booklet containing information for young people. That is why later today we will discuss cyber-bullying with expert speakers. And that is why tomorrow we will explore the issues of exercise and diet with another set of prominent panelists. Although these topics are somewhat of a crowded space we want to identify achievable action points and would appreciate dialogue with you about them in due course.

Before I conclude can I take the opportunity to congratulate you on the recent decision to provide additional resource teaching hours for children categorised as having 'mild' Down's syndrome. We admire the way that you listened to the case that had been made for so long and we applaud you for your willingness to take the initiative on something that means so much to so many parents and families. This really is about quality of life. And touches an area that is close to the heart of many of our members as they go about their work as SNAs.

Unlike the homogeneity of the teacher conferences, you will have seen today a more disparate group of education staff represented by IMPACT. Disparate perhaps but united in a common endeavour. And united too in that they have been forgotten or disregarded for too long. All we seek is equality and parity of treatment. Nowhere is that parity absent more than in the exclusion of most of our members from the boards of management of schools. We are told that this is a result of the provisions of the 1998 Education Act. But, Minister, a school is a different place than 17 years ago – for a start there are now thousands of SNAs and other school staff who are denied even the possibility of membership of a board of management. This is wrong at a very basic level. It also flies in the face of all modern approaches to industrial democracy. And it simply must be put right.

I finish by wishing you well in your onerous responsibility. The Department of Education has a long history predating the foundation of the state. You perhaps have another year in office. The increasing numbers entering our education system are counting on you. It could be a year with a lasting legacy. And rest assured that if you are prepared to display the courage to make the crucial difference you will have our full support.

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