

# Irish Daily Mail

## COMMENT

### Tax-drenched voters deserve some respite

IF there is one economic indicator that cannot be disputed, it is the Government's tax-take.

The inflow of money into the Revenue Commissioners' coffers does not mysteriously rise of its own accord.

No, it rises because consumers are spending more, employers are taking on more workers and businesses are growing their profits – all activities that, whether we like it or not, are taxable.

The latest official figures show tax revenue for the first four months of this year to be two per cent higher than forecast and almost six per cent higher than the same period last year.

And that – thank God – is the clearest indication yet that the economy is, at long last, beginning to take off and we are emerging from five years of recession.

It means Finance Minister Michael Noonan has no excuse not to deliver on his frequent promise, repeated again this week, to deliver meaningful tax cuts in the Budget to the squeezed middle.

If he and his Cabinet colleagues need any reminder of the political imperative to do so, they need look no further than the protests that greeted the Taoiseach on the campaign trail in Cork yesterday.

Much as Mr Kenny might like this election to be fought on broader economic issues – and, in particular, his success in bringing the reign of the Troika to an end – the reality is very different.

It is the drip-drip effect of water charges, property taxes and mortgage arrears – and the daily struggle to survive financially when pushed to the pin of one's collar – that really exercises voters' minds.

The entry of mortgage arrears campaigner David Hall of New Beginnings into the Dublin West by-election race is yet another indicator of this inescapable political reality.

Meanwhile, whatever damage Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams may have suffered as a result of this week's arrest, his party's surge in popularity is due in no small measure to its own resolute focus on such bread-and-butter issues.

The Government ignores such warning signs at its peril.

### Al fresco fiasco

THE belated blossoming of an outdoor café culture in Irish towns and cities may have been an unintentional spin-off of the smoking ban. But it is certainly not to be sneezed at.

Publicans and restaurateurs have been extraordinarily diligent and inventive in offering comfortable al fresco facilities to their patrons, despite our frequently inhospitable climate.

And as a result, pavements that would otherwise be deserted after 6pm, nowadays throng with life and, indeed, in the right weather, can take on a positively Mediterranean aura.

Yet Dublin City Council not only insists on charging pubs and restaurants for the privilege of placing tables and chairs outside their premises – they charge three times the Spanish and Italian rates.

Small businesses pay quite enough to the Government as matters stand, without being subjected to an additional, grossly unfair stealth tax that is not only anti-business but anti-pleasure as well.

It should be scrapped. We should be fostering a café culture, not penalising it.

### That winning initial

WHO would ever have guessed? People who stick a middle initial into their name – like William B Yeats, John F Kennedy and, well, Charles J Haughey – tend to get on better in life.

Ah, but now there's scientific evidence to confirm as much. And the names of the enterprising researchers who came to this earth-shattering conclusion?

Well, the University of Limerick academics who produced the learned study are... Dr Wijnand AP van Tilburg and Dr Eric R Igou. No prizes for guessing where that idea came from.

## A provocative essay attacking the failed

**M**Y wife is a secondary school teacher. She is not a member of ASTI, believing the union does not serve the best interests of second-level teachers. Yet, like so many in ASTI, she passionately opposes Ruairi Quinn's vision for Irish education.

I, too, am an educator, having taught at various universities for over two decades. For me, no government department matters more than Education. That is because the future of a nation is determined in the classroom.

Put simply, Education is not a minor department, but one which can potentially change the ideological complexion of the country. Ruairi Quinn understands this, which is why, I suspect, he lobbied hard for his current job.

That he describes his 'reforms' as part of a 'big agenda', suggests that Minister Quinn is waging a gentle revolution in favour of his cherished ideals.

Those ideals, some of which the Minister recently outlined in our sister paper, *The Irish Mail* on Sunday, will radically transform the way our children are taught. He wrote: 'We need to move away from the sorting and judging of 15-year-olds to a system that provides them with feedback on what and how they learn. The current system narrows learning experiences, it narrows choice and it narrows skill sets. Ultimately, it narrows life choices.'

In response, Minister Quinn proposes a new junior cycle that moves away from 'judging students to providing them with structured feedback on their learning'.

He envisions an assessment-based system that cultivates skills such as 'oral argument', and one that enables students to function as team members in 'solving complex problems'.

The current system of examinations is, he argues, 'incapable of assessing these key skills and if they cannot be assessed, they have no business in a classroom focused on the final exam'.

In sum, the new Junior Cycle Student Award is 'intended to disrupt' the old system, by seeing teachers, not as 'enablers, advocates or even judges, but liberators'. Note the language used by the minister: rupture, liberation and empowerment – all terms typically deployed by those who consider the classroom a laboratory for social engineering. In my view, this is not reform, but a revolutionary attempt to restructure Irish society along egalitarian lines.

**A**S with most people in this country, my wife and I are both products of the educational system Mr Quinn is endeavouring to end. It was a knowledge-centred system, one rooted in the 'best which has been thought and said'. I can still recall the excitement of coming to grips with the poetry of John Donne, the thrill of listening to Mozart and the emotional response we all had to Dickens.

Our teachers were preparing us for intensive exams, yet they were also expanding our minds beyond horizons we could barely imagine. Their purpose was to shake us out of our childish ways by providing higher ideals to which we could all aspire. In so doing, they enabled us to participate in a project that had at its heart, what Mr Quinn calls, 'a celebration of real achievement'. For us, the State examinations

# Dismantling our tried and trusted education system risks condemning countless children to the prison house of ignorance

SATURDAY  
ESSAY



by Dr Mark  
Dooley

were not an exercise in 'narrow precision', but the natural culmination of a pedagogical process that aimed at excellence.

They forced you to work hard, learn much and to expect the rewards of due diligence. Indeed, I can say with conviction that nothing focused my mind, or helped clarify my thoughts, more than those exams.

Preparing for exams, and assessing the results with our teachers, was all the feedback we needed.

Did this process, as Mr Quinn

maintains, narrow our skill sets or life choices? If anything, it enhanced them by equipping us with a vast range of knowledge and the ability to discern how to put it into practice.

Did it diminish our capacity to present an 'oral argument'? I hold a doctorate in philosophy, have published eight books and argued with some of the finest thinkers in the world.

I mention this only because I credit the old exam system as that which provided me with the frame of reference and the logical

wherewithal to write and argue confidently. As all debaters realise, effective argument requires extensive factual knowledge. You must possess the capacity to invoke names, dates and stock phrases if you are to persuade and prevail. But how can you acquire such knowledge without first learning according to conventional norms and practices? And how can a student be satisfactorily assessed, except through an examination which determines the validity or otherwise of what he claims to know?

You can only provide students with 'structured feedback on their learning' when it has been determined that their learning is comprehensive and credible.

If 'continuous assessment' is ultimately flawed, it is because it can never fully determine if a student truly knows what he submits in class. For example,

# ideology behind Ruairi Quinn's 'reforms'



system to one that is child-centred. This must be what he means when he says the JCSA will absolve teachers 'from collaborating in the preparation of 15-year-olds for narrow judgment on restrictive criteria'. It must be what he means when he condemns the traditional exam process as something blind to students 'capacity for growth, their maturity or the notion of exploring and developing interests as they age'.

Ironically, just as Minister Quinn is waging a crusade to demolish Irish educational standards and distinctions, his British counterpart is doing everything in his power to restore them. After 30 years of declining standards in British schools, Education Secretary Michael Gove has made it his mission to revoke what he describes as the 'anti-knowledge culture'.

That culture took root, according to Gove, because socialist egalitarians believed schools 'shouldn't be doing anything so old-fashioned as passing on knowledge, requiring children to work hard, or immersing them in anything like dates in history or times tables in mathematics. These ideologues may have been inspired by generous ideals, but the result of their approach has been countless children condemned to a prison house of ignorance'.

**T**HAT the British Labour Party has vowed to 'dismantle' Mr Gove's reforms, that they have devised a counter programme, including a 'light-touch curriculum' which puts 'students and parents first', proves this is one culture war they are determined to win. They know that should Gove prevail, educational equality will be exposed as the figment it undoubtedly is.

Ruairi Quinn is also inspired by generous ideals, but his 'big agenda' has already been tried and found desperately wanting. Michael Gove is correct: Similar policies adopted in Britain over a period of three decades did indeed condemn countless children to a prison house of ignorance.

Are we prepared to condemn our children to a similar fate? For that is exactly what will happen if our Education Minister should succeed in dismantling a tried and trusted system. If teachers like my wife are at their wits' end, it is because they can see first-hand the corrosive consequences of Mr Quinn's so-called 'reforms'.

They recognise that this is nothing short of ideology masquerading as enlightenment. They also understand that empty slogans cannot compensate for a system that distinguishes students on the basis of merit, and which enables them to excel in a world where competitive advantage is prized.

All this is by way of saying that the new JCSA, with its emphasis on reforming exams, will certainly not prepare students for the real world. It is but the latest version of what German philosopher Hegel called 'the play theory of education', one that 'lowers serious pursuits, and education itself, to a form of childishness for which the children themselves have scant respect'.

If so, it is not the teachers, but the children who should worry Mr Quinn. He may not want us to judge them, but Irish students will ultimately stand in judgment over him. For what the Education Minister seems not to recognise is that life itself is a test.

Whether we succeed or fail, others will surely judge, even when they have been warned not to do so.

my wife and other teachers are becoming increasingly aware of students presenting work for assessment which contains all the signs of plagiarism and parental 'assistance'.

The one and only way a teacher can be satisfied that a student truly comprehends a topic is by testing him or her. However, according to Mr Quinn, that is wrong because it 'judges' students. But what is education if not a process of judging pupils against objective standards of excellence?

As I see it, the whole point of education is to lead students from ignorance to knowledge, from opinion to truth. If they are not successfully making that transition, they must be judged accordingly. For how else are they expected to see where they are going wrong, and what they must do in order to make

it right? This is not to say there is no room for assessment in education, but only that it should never take priority over examinations. For when it does, teachers are unable to measure the full extent of their students' academic merits.

Without examinations, in other words, they are unable to provide pupils 'with structured feedback on their learning'.

The true goal of Mr Quinn's 'big agenda' appears to be revealed when he opposes judging students in favour of liberating them. I have no doubt this is a well-meaning attempt to improve the 'learning environment'.

Still, it begs the question: What are teachers supposed to be liberating their students from? The answer is, of course, the knowledge-based curriculum which made our educational system so effective. To liberate students

from the old curriculum, and from the exam system which was its natural conclusion, is to put equality in the place of distinction. By their very nature exams distinguish students. They enable us to judge the best from the rest.

If socialist egalitarians do not approve of examinations, it is because they demonstrate that people are essentially unequal. They have different talents, aptitudes and skills, all of which are clearly highlighted in and through the exam process. That is, exams shine a light on those natural distinctions which no egalitarian can ultimately deny.

Doing away with exams is, therefore, the best scheme to sustain the illusion of equality in the classroom. Like all socialist egalitarians, Mr Quinn seems to think this involves a shift away from a knowledge-centred

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