

# Irish Daily Mail

## COMMENT

### There are no winners in this childish row

THE spat that broke out yesterday on Morning Ireland between Jack O'Connor, president of Siptu, and Kieran Mulvey, chairman of the Workplace Relations Commission, was juvenile and unseemly. Interviewed on the programme, Mr Mulvey said he believed the deal on offer to the striking Luas drivers was one any other profession would have accepted, and he bemoaned a lack of leadership on the part of the union, pointing out that no-one from Siptu had contacted him since the most recent proposals were rejected to explain why.

Incensed, Mr O'Connor came on the programme a while later to say he believed this showed that Mr Mulvey was biased against the union, and called on the WRC chief to resign.

Now as it happens, Mr Mulvey is due to retire soon anyway, so while this sort of sabre-rattling might play well with the Luas drivers, it came with the hollow ring of amateur dramatics.

As we saw last month, when the WRC negotiated in a dispute that threatened 700 jobs at Cadbury Ireland, the commission can be highly effective.

Mr O'Connor's aggressive intervention shows that the mechanism for the settling of disputes can and does become personalised, and that does no-one any favours. The mechanism is there for a reason and there is no point in asking the caretaker government to intervene, because the Labour Court and the WRC are supposed to act independently.

That said, perhaps it is time for some third party, also independent, to be called in to mediate between Siptu and the WRC. We cannot allow a situation to develop where silly territorial disputes and perceived offence get in the way of what both bodies are charged with, namely negotiating, then recommending, reasonable deals that can bring an end to disputes that cause inconvenience and hardship to the public.

The Luas dispute has gone on for long enough. Personal differences must be cast aside and everyone should get back around the table without delay, because among the general public, sympathy for the workers has completely evaporated at this point.

### Leo the bystander

DURING negotiations with Independents on the formation of a government, Health Minister Leo Varadkar said that when it came to the budget, his department was always last in the queue. He said it quite colourfully, too.

On the doorsteps during the election campaign, the shortcomings in the HSE were identified as the reason why many wanted a change of government. This makes it doubly startling that the message appears not to have got through, and it is depressing to hear the minister in charge of the department express his frustration so bluntly.

That said, this is not the first time that Mr Varadkar has spoken about the Department of Health as if he were somehow a detached third party.

If health is indeed the last item on the government agenda, he has had plenty of time to change that. It is not too late for him to insist more strenuously that it be given the attention and consideration the electorate clearly signalled that it wanted.

### A miraculous baby

WHEN RTÉ 2fm presenter Louise McSherry was diagnosed with cancer, she was warned that the treatment might leave her unable to conceive. Against all the odds, she announced yesterday that she and her husband Gordon Spierin are expecting a baby.

The miracle of life is always a gift, but seldom more so than in the case of a cancer survivor. We send our warmest congratulations to the couple.

# AUTUMN OF

## We are sleepwalking into educational chaos when schools go back in September because a militant union has opted for strikes over compromise on the Junior Cert. Only when decent teachers wrest control of education from those who could destroy it will schools improve

MY wife was an idealist when she joined the teaching profession in 1999. Having previously worked in public relations, it was a decision she made somewhat late in life. By trading the boardroom for the classroom, she followed what she believed was a noble vocation.

My wife has never regretted that decision. As a second-level teacher of history and English, she sees her students as the future of this country. In giving them a passion for the past, she hopes they will come to understand who they are and how they might one day shape our moral destiny. Even now, after so many years, it is inspiring to hear her speak about her students. Nothing gives her more joy than to see them penetrate a particular period of history, thus enabling them to challenge the cosy consensus surrounding it. For her, this is nothing less than a work of love.

And yet, even though nothing can diminish her passion for teaching, my wife laments the dire state of Irish education. She, and many of her colleagues, believe that if things continue as they are, the profession will soon enter a phase of terminal decline. As they see it, both the Department of Education and the teaching unions have ruined what was once an exceptional education system.

At their annual conferences this week, we heard the teaching unions complain about unequal pay and conditions for recent recruits to the profession. However, if that were the only thing wrong with our educational system, teachers such as my wife would have very little to protest about. It is the rot that goes to the heart of the entire structure which causes her so much dismay.

As it happens, my wife is not a member of the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland. When she began teaching, she assumed that the union would protect teachers' interests and do justice to their cause. She soon came to believe, however, that the ASTI did very little for that cause and seemed more concerned with protecting its own parochial interests.

FOR example, it looks like the union has been hijacked by the most militant teachers, those who habitually opt for confrontation over consensus. This means that the trust between the union and school management – which is essential to run any school effectively – is virtually non-existent. It doesn't matter that those managing the school were restricted in what they could do by the Department of Education. What seems to matter to the union is simply to push its agenda irrespective of the impact it might have on the school.

When this became apparent to my wife, she left the union. What's more, many of her colleagues have subsequently departed for similar reasons. All are united in their belief that the antics of the ASTI are not only damaging to Irish education, but are also having a direct impact on their students.

Recent reports of dysfunction at the highest level within the ASTI appear to have vindicated my wife's decision. Respected educationalist and teacher Brian Mooney, with whom I worked while lecturing in UCD, paints a sorry picture: 'Organisationally, the ASTI is completely dysfunctional and in no way reflects the views of the vast majority of teachers in schools. Most teachers have never attended a union branch meeting, and thus have no input into policy or in selecting those who will represent them at national level.'

This has been starkly highlighted by the fact that even though a joint statement on principles and implementation regarding the new Junior Certificate reforms was signed by the

SATURDAY  
ESSAY



by Mark  
Dooley

presidents and general secretaries of both the ASTI and the Teachers' Union of Ireland in May 2015, the executive of the ASTI refused to back the agreement. The agreement was simply sent out to union members without any advice or direction on how to respond. That only 38% of members voted and rejected the reforms, some of whom are retired teachers, surely speaks for itself.

The consequence is, of course, that we now face a series of one-day strikes when the new school year resumes in September. That is completely unacceptable to teachers such as my wife, especially as the TUI positively engaged its members and gave the reforms its full support. This means that, if the strikes proceed, she and many others with similar convictions will have no option but to make themselves available for work.

At its annual conference last Wednesday, the ASTI voted to

cease fulfilling 33 additional hours agreed under the Croke Park national wage deal in 2010. The hours, which were mainly used for staff meetings, were described as 'stupid' and 'demeaning' by some delegates. My wife agrees: those meetings, in which teachers sit around discussing meaningless documents, are a waste of precious student-teacher time.

The question that must be asked, however, is why did the ASTI and the other unions initially agree to this ludicrous measure? If, by introducing that measure, the Department of Education sought to improve the quality, efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the system, it has been an unmitigated disaster. For how can it be argued that extra staff meetings – in which teachers 'analyse' the latest policy papers published by the department, or simply sit around analysing themselves – enhance the quality of education in Irish

schools? The reality is those extra hours are used primarily for pencil-pushing. In a system already bloated with bureaucracy, it has simply led to more of the same. Not a single extra hour was spent with students.

No-one, least of all my wife, disputes that teachers should conduct parent-teacher meetings outside school hours. However, what is the point of forcing teachers to conduct staff meetings when that time could be more effectively discharged in the classroom? This shows there is a dangerous lack of imagination in both the Department of Education and among the teaching unions.

If the unions were really serious about reform, they would have insisted that the extra hours agreed under Croke Park be devoted to extra teaching or enhanced practical and project work with students. This would have been an obvious way to enable teachers to complete or supplement course work, and to have more student-teacher contact. Instead, they look to have spent six years talking to themselves about things that benefit very few – least of all their pupils.

The teaching unions are, of course, justified in opposing many of the Department of Edu-

# DISCONTENT



education's policies. They were right, for example, to oppose the absurd idea that teachers grade their own students in the new Junior Cert examination. That is because independent assessment is the cornerstone of any effective exam system.

For teachers, however, there should have been much more dialogue and engagement before the new Junior Cert was agreed. If there is widespread disgruntlement with the new exam, it is because it is an attempt to replace a knowledge-based curriculum with one that is completely child-centred. With its obsessive emphasis on 'literacy and numeracy', on continuous assessment at the expense of rigorous examinations, and on interpretation over factual knowledge, the new curriculum is already undermining educational excellence.

One young teacher recently remarked to my wife that his students have so little experience sitting an exam they seriously struggled when doing their recent Junior Cert mock papers. Instead of complaining about the 'practical implementation' of the new Junior Cycle, why don't the unions robustly question the ideological agenda behind the revised curriculum? Why don't they reflect the widespread anger

among many teachers at the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment - a quango that effectively moulds Irish education in its own image and likeness?

Another reason my wife despairs of the ASTI is that it does little to enhance the public perception of teachers. Its dogged insistence on dancing to the tune of a minority of its militant members in holding strikes and stoppages serves only to intensify the general view that all teachers have an arrogant sense of entitlement when it comes to perks that people in the private sector can only dream of. There is truth in that perception, but it is not the whole truth.

The teaching profession is clogged with dead wood - with teachers who, instead of performing at their peak, take the easy option. Their lax approach affects their students and gives teachers a bad name. Moreover, because many of them hold senior positions, they have far greater entitlements than those who have recently joined the profession, but who are, in many cases, far better teachers.

There is an irony in the fact that the ASTI used its conference this week to call for equal entitlements for new teachers. If they were really serious about

this, they would insist that pay and promotion be linked to productivity and not solely to seniority. The reason they won't do that is, of course, because many of its members hold senior positions.

**P**UT simply, it doesn't matter if a senior teacher consistently registers a poor performance. The fact that they are 'senior' means they cannot be forced to make way for someone who, though less senior, may be a far better asset in the classroom. In other words, the education system very often rewards mediocrity over merit.

If you are serious about reforming Irish education, serious about making it more efficient and effective, surely the first thing on the agenda should be to reward and promote the best teachers, rather than those whose only distinction is that they have served the most time.

That the teaching unions rarely mention this suggests this is one element of the system they don't wish to see reformed. Without doing so, however, young and vibrant teachers will continually sink to the bottom while

dead wood will perpetually float to the top.

Brian Mooney puts it well when he says that 'we are sleep-walking into educational chaos this autumn'. That is because the largest teaching union in the State has once again opted for militancy over reasonable compromise. It is also because we have a Department of Education whose vision is limited by its own ideological agenda.

For the sake of our students, it is therefore imperative that teachers who have no truck with either the ASTI or the department are heard. As it stands, the system is weak, ineffective and inefficient. Bad teachers gain at the expense of good, while the schemes to improve efficiency within the system have resulted in time-wasting talking shops.

Such problems will not be solved by unnecessary and divisive strikes. They will only be solved when the majority of decent teachers wrest control of their profession from those who could destroy it.

Only then will the needs of students be put before those of radical teachers and an ideologically driven department - people who have long forgotten that education begins and ends in the womb of knowledge that is a classroom.

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