

Private Members' Business. - Junior Certificate Curriculum: Motion.

Wednesday, 29 May 1996

Miss Quill: It is refreshing to have this type of discussion on education. I commend Deputy Martin for creating the conditions under which that has been made possible. We have spent countless hours recently talking about education [600] in terms of ownership, control and structures, but we have not spent enough time talking about what and how we teach our young people. It is important that we should have a philosophy and vision of education. Whatever else we lacked, we have always had a good system of education, that stands up well in comparison with education systems in other developed countries, and that is widely acknowledged.

There is great pressure on our system to meet new demands that appear to come on-stream every day, partly arising from the social problems in society. It is fundamental that in meeting those demands we would not take any step or measure that would downgrade or in any way dismantle our fine system of education. I regard a knowledge of history and geography as being of core importance to any young citizen in this or any succeeding generation. To seek to tamper with subjects as fundamental to self-knowledge, self-worth, self-respect and self-esteem as history and as fundamental to a knowledge of one's natural and physical environment as geography, highlights a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of education in shaping a young person and a community. We should seek to upgrade the teaching of both in terms of methodology and content. There has been some bad teaching of history in the past and some bad practice on the part of history teachers, of whom I was one until nine years ago. Given the challenges facing young people in this age of advanced technology, mechanisation and consumerism, the best weapon we can give them is a good education.

Education is a discipline and I know of none that is better than the discipline of history well taught. What is the methodology of teaching history and what does history do for people? It teaches them to evaluate facts, to separate them from opinions and fiction and to make a judgment on what is true and what is false. Is that not one of the most [601] important gifts? I do not have children, but if I had there is nothing more I would want to give them than the ability to be able to separate what is true from what is false. Those of us in politics know what can happen with the big lie and the soundbite. What better way can we equip young people to be able to make judgments than to give them a good grounding in history? Anybody who has respect for people would consider the thought of downgrading history unthinkable.

What of geography? It is the lesson most people need to be able to read maps, the map of life and have a knowledge of and respect for their natural environment. It is unthinkable that geography or history would be downgraded in any respected system of education. I would love to talk for an hour on this motion, but time does not permit that. The key message I send to the Minister is not to dismantle our decent system of education. We must build on and improve it.

On the eve of the Northern elections, the philosophy of Wolfe Tone, if taught properly, is relevant — what matter if at different shrines we pray unto one God; what matter if at different times our fathers won the sod? Is that not the philosophy we should pass on to young people and substitute the common name of Irishman for Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter? That is our history, the one we should acknowledge in our every day thinking, that should shape our political decisions and that we should pass on to the next generation.