



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



Tuesday, 28 May 1996

Mr. Martin:   I move:

That Dáil Éireann declares its commitment to maintaining history and geography as core subjects on the junior certificate curriculum in second level schools and calls on the Government to amend the White Paper on Education entitled, *Charting our Future*, to include history and geography as core subjects in the junior certificate curriculum.

I propose to share my time with Deputy Mary Coughlan.

An Ceann Comhairle:   I am sure that is satisfactory and agreed.

Mr. Martin:   I move this motion to send a clear signal to the general public that Dáil Éireann is totally committed to maintaining history and geography as core subjects on the junior certificate curriculum, and calls on the Minister for Education to give effect to this by amending the White Paper on Education to include history and geography as core subjects on that curriculum. There is a clear need for this to be done, given what has happened since the publication of the White Paper. The Minister for Education has attempted to evade this issue in the past number of months and to confuse the public on what exactly happened regarding history and geography.

This debate arose because of the content of the White Paper relating to the junior certificate curriculum. The Green Paper, *Education for a Changing World*, particularly the section dealing with the junior certificate curriculum, contrasts with the White Paper in its treatment of history and geography. The Green Paper clearly states in its preamble that the primary objective of the junior cycle is that students should complete a broad and balanced course of study in a variety of subjects relevant to their personal development, the world of work and the enjoyment of their leisure and recreation, and also that broadly based [259] programmes must be made available for all the students at levels appropriate to their abilities.

Specifically, the authors of the Green Paper took on board the advice of the NCCA that the programme for all students should include the following as core subjects: Irish, English, mathematics, history and geography or environmental and social studies, which combines elements of history, geography, social and political education and science or a technological subject. Clearly, history and geography were to be core subjects on the junior certificate curriculum, and the authors of the Green Paper had received position papers from the NCCA advising such a course of action. It is extraordinary that in a recent speech on this subject the Minister still talked about receiving advice from the NCCA, despite the fact that she received

such advice on two occasions, and on both occasions the NCCA recommended that history and geography should remain as core subjects on the junior certificate curriculum.

The situation changed dramatically in the White Paper on Education, *Charting our Educational Future*, which was published over a year ago. It states that the objective of the junior certificate programme is to provide breadth and balance and a curriculum that is both relevant and appropriate to the aptitudes and abilities of all students. What is striking about the White Paper's treatment of the junior certificate curriculum is its failure to mention history and geography in any context. Clearly, the status of history and geography is substantially and significantly reduced in the White Paper. This is significantly different treatment from that given in the Green Paper. More significantly, the White Paper states that the curricular framework as outlined will apply to all second level schools and to all students in the junior cycle. This is an important point because in all her replies to parliamentary questions on this issue to date the Minister has been at pains to make [260] the point that history and geography are compulsory only in secondary schools but are not compulsory in vocational and comprehensive schools.

The White Paper is a policy document which has been endorsed by the Government. Decisions have been made on the policy framework for the development of the curriculum at junior cycle and applies to all second level schools irrespective of their title. The White Paper develops this point when it states:

For the purposes of certification the following specific requirements will be necessary. The Programme for all students at junior cycle will include a core of Irish, English, mathematics, science or a technological subject, and at least three further subjects from a wide range of full courses and short courses. All students should have access to the study of a modern European language and to have a recognised full course in at least one creative or performing art form.

History or geography is not mentioned in this paragraph nor anywhere in the entire section of the White Paper dealing with the junior certificate curriculum. The White Paper further states that each school will be expected to provide students with experience in the following areas: language and literature; mathematical studies; science and technology; civic, social and political education; arts education; religious education; guidance counselling and pastoral care; physical education; health education (including personal and social development), relationships and sexuality education. Neither history nor geography is mentioned. It is important to emphasise that point. The Minister is trying to give the impression that there is no reason to worry, that the status of history and geography was not changed, but neither history nor geography is mentioned in the section of the White Paper dealing with the junior certificate curriculum. That is what rang alarm bells among history and geography [261] teachers and gave rise to the campaign that has been ongoing for some time.

There is no doubt in my mind that in the White Paper the Minister for Education clearly attempted to eliminate history and geography from the core curriculum and significantly reduce its status on the curriculum. How otherwise can she explain the omission of any reference to history and geography in that section of the White Paper? Surely the intent was clear, and the Minister should be honest about it. There has been too much evasion and dishonesty in the Minister's approach to this issue. Of late, she has attempted to row back and reverse the policy decision, but the White Paper clearly signalled a change.

When I tabled a parliamentary question on this matter on 20 February 1996 the Minister acknowledged that the White Paper did not specifically mention history or geography within the group of subjects in the core curriculum but offered the opinion that the vast majority of schools would be likely to continue to offer these subjects. In reply to that question the Minister pointed out that 740 out of a total of 772 second level schools currently offer history and geography at junior certificate level. Why then did the Minister omit them from the White Paper? Clearly she had signalled a change of approach and indicated that history and geography would no longer remain as core subjects on the junior certificate curriculum. That is why our motion is so important.

We should be clear about the status of the White Paper. It represents a policy decision by the Government. In relation to its treatment of history and geography, that decision needs to be reversed and the White Paper amended. That is why I have tabled the motion in the language I have, calling for the amendment of the White Paper and to include history and geography as core subjects in the junior certificate curriculum. A clear Government decision should be taken. It should be open and transparent, without clever ambiguities, fudging or an attempt to confuse. *Raison d'être*

[262] It is clear from the White Paper that other subjects are given considerable prominence which are not currently core subjects. Did the Minister, for example, envisage replacing history and geography with political education, with the creative arts, or an extra modern language? We need more openness in terms of what the Minister intended to achieve via the White Paper in relation to the junior certificate curriculum. It is regrettable there has been no fundamental debate in this House on curriculum issues apart from the debate on the White Paper. Fianna Fáil believes that history and geography are extremely important broad based subjects that for very valid reasons should form part of the core curriculum.

- History is a broadly based subject. It is extremely important for any society to know about its past and to preserve its cultural and linguistic heritage. It is more important for countries such as Ireland where the preservation of cultural identity is very important given that to a certain degree we have lost our linguistic identity. History has formed an important part of our cultural heritage. Young people need to know about their past. We need to learn from the mistakes and achievements of the past, but, more important in my opinion as a former history teacher, history opens up many other opportunities for young people. It is an interdisciplinary subject. Through history many young people have learned for the first time about the wonders of the world of literature, art, drama and so on.
- Many young students first learn of Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper or Michelangelo's Mona Lisa, the Sistine Chapel and the wonders of the Renaissance through the junior certificate history class. Studying history at junior certificate level broadens the horizons of many young people and facilitates their study of other countries, cultures and developments throughout the ages.
- History leads to a greater understanding of different communities. Many students first learn about famous writers, the [263] great achievements in science and economics in the history class. Industrial and agricultural development and so on is embraced by history. History embraces the totality of the life experience of human kind and in that sense it is particularly appropriate for a foundation course and for facilitating the broadly based development of a young person, the fundamental objective of the junior certificate programme as outlined in the White Paper.

- Very often the methodology for teaching history can contain an interdisciplinary approach. History is not simply taught only in lecture-style context. Many students have discovered their local town, city or communities through the study of local history, through simply walking around the local areas and discovering local monuments, the history of streets and the folklore of a given area. The study of local history develops tremendous civic pride and awareness and a practical patriotism, which is so important to the development of society. In short, history is a broad based subject which embraces many different disciplines and opens up many opportunities for young people in terms of further study and interests.

Geography likewise is an extremely crucial subject at a critical formative level in a student's education. Professor William Smith, a Professor of Geography at UCC summed up the outstanding qualities of geography in a letter to *The Irish Times* on Monday, 27 May in the following terms:

Geography is a long-established subject which is concerned with the complex relationships between societies and their environments. Young students find in geography a discipline which explores the nature of lived environments, in their own localities, regionally, nationally and at European and the global levels. It is by definition a down-to-earth subject concerned with key human concerns of the late 20th century such as landscape appreciation and environmental [264] management, economic, social and the regional development, Ireland's place in a changing Europe, Third World issues and the consequences of the globalisation of economies for all our lives. It is also a subject that familiarise young students with the political geography of international relations and conflicts.

Another interesting letter in *The Irish Times* on Monday pointed out that TDs perhaps found geography a very useful subject when it came to discovering the nooks and crannies of townlands and polling districts. Professor Smith further points out that geography in particular will assist young Irish people to acquire a keen awareness of their national and European heritage and identity coupled with a global awareness and respect and care for the environment. One has only to look at the bibliography at the end of geography books to see the broad range of subjects and disciplines that are embraced by the subject of geography. Geography communicates to students ways of seeing and understanding the world which transcends the different divisions between the natural and human sciences.

Through geography, students learn to use maps, diagrams and photographs as a means of presenting and interpreting information about places. There is much practical work involved in geography. Many social skills are required for field work projects and so on. Modern technology applications also form a key part of present geographical study. Computer applications are well developed. Professor Smith is correct when he says he finds it astonishing that the Minister for Education has seen fit to go against the recommendations of the NCCA and many educational bodies in seeking to marginalise geography and history at the junior cycle.

The ASTI in its recent publication clearly reaffirmed its commitment to the retention of history and geography as core subjects on the curriculum. The ASTI representatives at the course committee of the NCCA made their views [265] quite clearly known on the previous occasions that the NCCA addressed this subject.

I know, of course, that the Geographical Society of Ireland has made a very comprehensive submission to the Minister for Education on the value of geography in the junior certificate curriculum. This society represents a broad based constituency, which includes professional geographers, teachers and the general public, including many professional planners whose training is in geography. At its recent annual general meeting grave reservations were expressed on the treatment of geography and history in the White Paper, *Charting our Education Future*. Its submission cited the United States of America as an important example of a society which is recognised as having an unacceptably high level of geographical illiteracy as a result of the diminished status given to geography in the school curriculum for several decades.

US educators are now having to devote substantial resources to remedy the situation. They argue validity that it would be very unfortunate if Ireland were to devalue geography at a time when educators elsewhere are allocating major resources to re-establish the subject within their school curriculum. The society in its letter to the Minister requested to discuss its concerns. I hope the Minister would in addition to discussing the issue with the NCCA meet the History Teachers Association and the various representatives of the subject of geography. That is true democracy and it is important that their concerns are heard by the Minister and not by a programme manager.

The History Teachers Association has been engaged in a very effective campaign on this issue. I met with the history association as far back as last February. It was the association which initially developed the debate on the campaign and great credit is due to it on its success in forcing the Minister to gradually reverse her earlier policy decision. However, it is extremely important that the Minister be quite [266] specific in her commitment in the House this evening. Clearly she must indicate that she will amend the White Paper on Education to include history and geography. The White Paper states on page 48:

The programme for all students at junior cycle will include a core of Irish, English, Mathematics...

We are asking the Minister to include "History, Geography, Science Technology...". We want to have it clearly stated that history and geography are included in that section of the White Paper. There is a need to do this because there is widespread concern about the bona fides of the Minister in this regard. The Minister issued a statement last weekend to the Irish Committee for Historical Sciences in which some progression from earlier statements was made. I suspect that the fact that we tabled this Private Members' motion last Friday was a fillip to the Minister, an incentive to her to accelerate the row back and the reversal of policy she has been engaged in for some time.

It is quite clear that the Minister's Government colleagues have been urging her to pursue such a course of action. I read the statement that was presented last week to the Committee for Historical Sciences and noted the degree of ambivalence and ambiguity in it. While it represents some progression, it needs to be tied down more specifically. In her statement the Minister attempted to reassure her audience that she has not changed the status of history and geography as core subjects in the junior cycle. The point is, however, that the White Paper certainly creates a new framework which essentially reduces significantly the status of these subjects.

The Minister also stated that she recently requested the NCCA to respond as a matter of priority to the debate on the broad issue of the junior certificate curriculum. The NCCA has made a number of recommendations to this and previous Ministers, in all cases recommending history and geography [267] as core parts of the curriculum. The Minister said that once the NCCA has completed its report, it is her intention to make a series of recommendations to her Government colleagues on the junior cycle core curriculum, including her commitment to the retention of the study of history and geography in that curriculum. What does this statement mean? Does it mean that history and geography retain the status they currently enjoy in second level schools in terms of their time-table, space and so forth? Are we talking about short courses or modules which will be fitted into a broader curriculum? Will the Minister become more flexible about the core curriculum, make a broad statement about what it involves and include a whole range of subjects with the result that history and geography will have a lower status than they currently enjoy? I have spoken to many history and geography teachers since the Minister's statement last weekend and they are extremely concerned about this point. They are anxious that the current status of history and geography in the curriculum be retained as they are. We do not want any clever manipulation of the situation.

It is incredible to hear the Minister say she will advise her Government colleagues on the junior cycle core curriculum. What is the actual status of the White Paper? This was meant to be the definitive policy decision of the Government with regard to the development of education. I know it was rushed through the Cabinet and it is obvious that the Minister's colleagues did not read it. I would guess that there was no discussion by the Cabinet on the status of history and geography in the core curriculum. The White Paper was rushed through because the Minister had difficulties with the teachers' unions at that time. There were political reasons the members of the Cabinet nodded their heads in approval of the White Paper. The Minister for Finance stated he was not going to provide extra resources for [268] it so it did not really matter. The Minister is going to advise her colleagues on the junior certificate curriculum a year after the Government's definitive policy statement was published. This makes no sense and calls into question the procedural propriety of what the Minister is doing in terms of the White Paper. The Green Paper was a discussion document, the White Paper was the policy document clearly outlining the Government policy on a wide range of issues, including the junior cycle curriculum.

The Minister's approach to this issue has created considerable anger throughout the country. People from a wide variety of backgrounds, not just history and geography, have complained about the Minister's treatment of these subjects. In every walk of life people have expressed anger at any intention by any Minister to eliminate history and geography as core subjects on the curriculum. Many people who would not be academically inclined have seen the value of history and geography in their own lives and are very much opposed to the policy views of the Minister as outlined in the White Paper. Teachers of history and geography have felt affronted and devalued by the Minister's approach.



In many respects career choices are changing because of the Minister's announcement. Young history and geography teachers are unsure as to their future, given the cloud hanging over their subject because of the Minister's comments. Parents have contacted me and asked if it would be advisable for their young sons or daughters to pursue history and geography in universities because of the contents of the White Paper. Considerable anger, doubt and confusion have been created by the Minister. The entire issue has been handled in a most incompetent manner.

The Minister has attempted, following an effective campaign by all concerned, to reverse the situation. We welcome this. No doubt some of her Government colleagues had been privately assuring the various interests that her views were not shared by them. [269] Some have apparently expressed horror at the Minister's intentions. Clearly her statement last weekend is a response to the promptings from her colleagues in Government, both from her own party and the other two parties which form part of the Government.

We in Fianna Fáil felt it was necessary to introduce this motion to ensure that a debate takes place on this issue and that the public interest and anger generated by it finds reflection in a constructive discussion in the House. Often the House stands accused of being somewhat irrelevant to developments outside and for not articulating accurately or effectively the views of the general public. Clearly it is important that these issues be discussed here, that the views of the general public find articulation here and that decisions follow from this debate which reflect the opinions of the vast majority of the Irish people. It is clear to me, following representations I have received from colleagues in the House, the general public and teachers of history and geography at second and third levels, that there is widespread opposition to the treatment of history and geography in the White Paper and to the Minister's intentions in this regard. There is widespread agreement that history and geography should remain as core subjects in the junior certificate curriculum. This is why we moved this motion.

Given the Minister's statement last weekend, we expect the Government to support the motion and facilitate its passage through the House. Dáil Éireann would then send a clear signal to the people that history and geography are essential to the development of a broadly based education for our young people. Accordingly, I commend the motion to the House.

## **Wednesday, 29 May 1996**

Mr. Martin:   I thank all those who contributed to the debate. The tabling of a Private Member's motion was the final stimulus in changing the Minister's mind. The first time the Minister used the term "core curriculum" in the context of history and geography was last Saturday in her speech to the Historical Association of Ireland. Until then, even in replies to parliamentary questions tabled as early as February last, the Minister made no mention of history and geography as core curriculum subjects and avoided making any commitment in that regard. In May, when further questions were asked by Deputy Keogh, myself and others, we were [607] given similar, evasive replies. At no stage did the Minister use the term "core curriculum".

The debate so far has been extremely interesting, but the Minister's contribution was extraordinary. Some Government speakers attempted to give the impression that our worries and fears were misplaced, that there was exaggeration and propaganda on the part of the Opposition, or that some teachers were reacting hysterically. I ask Government backbenchers to read the White Paper on Education and the Green Paper entitled "Towards a Changing World". There is a fundamental difference in the treatment of history and geography in the Green Paper as opposed to the White Paper. Not only are history and geography not mentioned as core subjects in the White Paper, they are not referred to. There has been a clear attempt, from the time of publication of the Green Paper and since the Minister came to power, to downgrade the status of history and geography. It was, therefore, necessary to put a Private Members' motion before the House to facilitate Members on all sides, because there are Members in the Fine Gael Party, the Labour Party and Democratic Left who were appalled at the content of the White Paper and the Minister's direction.

Let no one be under any misunderstanding, there was a clear policy to downgrade the status of history and geography as core subjects of the curriculum. It has taken about five months for the Minister to reverse that policy. It is extremely ungenerous of her not to support our motion but to table an amendment that is fundamentally — I regret having to say this — dishonest in its content. The amendment tabled by the Minister suggests there is a “commitment in the White Paper to promote and develop in pupils a knowledge and appreciation of their social and cultural heritage and environment through the [608] study of history and geography at junior certificate level”... There is no such commitment in the White Paper and that is why I cannot vote for this amendment. It is dishonest. It would be far better if the Minister was honest and having listened to the debate, read the letters to the newspapers and analysed the campaign, accepted my motion to amend the White Paper, acknowledging the broad wish to the Irish people to retain history and geography as core subjects in the junior certificate curriculum. It would have been better if she had agreed to amend the White Paper, which is the critical point of this debate. On the Order of Business this morning I asked the Taoiseach to clarify the status of a Government White Paper. It was always my understanding that a White Paper contained Government decisions, that a Green Paper was a discussion document and that, following the Green Paper, there were various consultations, contributions and submissions before the White Paper was produced which contains decisions which are implemented. That is why we specifically tabled a motion which seeks to amend the White Paper. As I said last evening, the White Paper states on page 48: “The programme for all students at junior cycle would include a core of Irish, English, Mathematics...” and we want it amended to include history and geography. It is as simple and straightforward as that.

While we welcome the Minister's reversal of policy, nonetheless there is still ambiguity and serious concern, as Deputy Keogh outlined, that what we are now looking at is perhaps an attempt to introduce short courses or modules in history and geography, that we may end up with a new definition of a core curriculum and that history and geography will still be downgraded. I respectfully suggest to the Minister and her advisers to heed the contributions from all sides of the House and to implement honestly the spirit of the [609] debate. Even if the Government wins the vote I urge her to be honourable and accept the declared wishes as articulated by Members.

It seems incredible that the Minister has returned yet again to the NCCA who advised the Minister twice that history and geography should be core subjects of the curriculum. The Minister said she is asking it as a matter of urgency to revise the junior certificate curriculum, but that work has already been done. We know the NCCA is being used as a political escape route to try to retain the Minister's credibility. I do not think the NCCA should be used in that manner. It seems that the entire issue of the junior certificate curriculum is again up for analysis. The only legitimate way to do that is to amend the White Paper or say that the section of the White Paper that deals with the junior certificate is no longer valid and we need to take a fresh look at it. I have noted the questions put to the NCCA and I have reservation about the direction it is leading us, the shortening of the history course and so forth. It seems incredible that more than a year after the publication of the White Paper the Minister is going back to the NCCA asking it as a matter of urgency to deal with this issue. The Minister decided to meet the NCCA on Tuesday and made her major U-turn speech on Saturday. That shows that parliamentary democracy can work or force people into certain action.

I echo Deputy Lenihan's remark on the importance of the European dimension to education. The White Paper lays great stress on the European dimension to education but I wonder if the

authors of the White Paper bothered to read the Council of Europe report: The Learning of History in Europe, issued in Strasbourg in 1994 which says that history is a unique discipline and “the Council of Europe's experts have argued that all [610] pupils should study history, at every level of their education, because it has a value that cannot be provided by other subjects”. History, they claimed “is a unique discipline, concerned with a special kind of training of the mind and imagination and with the imparting of an accurate body of knowledge which ensures that pupils understand others' points of view”. It seems that those who wrote the White Paper never bothered looking at the various reports from the Council of Europe, including the Council of Europe Report: The Role of History in the Formation of National Identity. Strasbourg 1996. It is regrettable that the Minister did not take these reports on board.

We are interested in the debate on broadening the curriculum but not overloading it. Nicholas Canning, a well known historian and chairman of the Irish Historical Sciences, wrote recently that, as it currently stands, history takes only one sixteenth of the junior certificate curriculum which does not in any way dominate the curriculum, the same applies to geography. They are not dominant subjects in the junior certificate curriculum. There have been attempts to evade and confuse the public. The Minister should accept our motion in good faith and commit herself to amending the White Paper. Irrespective of who is in power, the White Paper is the policy framework for the development of education towards the end of this decade. The document contains decisions and could be used by successive Ministers in future. The commitments made now could prove transient and may not give the type of guarantees required by the History Teachers' Association and other groups such as the Geographical Society which have campaigned effectively on this issue.

I commend the motion to the House.