

The HTAI: The Way Forward

The History Teachers' Association of Ireland has been in existence for more than forty years. It has grown in strength and influence over the years, as the only professional body to represent the interests of history teachers'. While we operate under our own constitution, like other subject associations, we have a commonality in our aims and objectives in that we seek to provide a forum and service for teachers of history at local and national level. The HTAI is also affiliated to other history organizations both in Ireland and Europe and enjoys a good working relationship with the Department of Education and Science.

Role of HTAI

Since 1962, the HTAI has provided regular in service to history teachers, which has often been organized in the absence of any provided by the Department of Education. However, in more recent times, the HTAI has tried to build on and augment the in service provisions provided by the Department of Education and Science. There have been seminars, workshops, regional and national conferences, field trips and tours abroad. The HTAI has also been involved in the development of new teaching methodologies and advising on classroom practice. It also enjoys representation on the various history syllabus committees set up by the NCCA.

The HTAI produces a regular newsletter and an annual journal, *Stair* and teachers have contributed articles to these as well as other national and international publications. For the last few years, the HTAI has maintained a web site which provides information and offers invaluable support to those who are teaching history where peer support is not always available in a school situation. In short, what the HTAI has succeeded in doing over the last four decades is to provide a pool of interested and enthusiastic teachers who are professionally competent and skilled to undertake the role of training and mentoring or other teachers.

Voluntary commitment

What really needs to be stressed of course is that the teachers on the ground, who do all this work, do so on a voluntary basis. They give freely of their time and effort. This financially un-rewarded work has enabled the provision of a national service on a very low cost basis. So it all the more regrettable that the nominal funding which the HTAI and other subject associations received in the past from the In Career Development Unit of the Department of Education and Science to help finance local and national conferences, has now been withdrawn. This indefensi-

ble decision was taken without any advance warning. It clearly illustrates the low level of regard which the Department of Education and Science has for the voluntary efforts and huge contributions made, not just by the HTAI, but indeed by all subject associations over the years.

As a result, the HTAI is now totally dependent on subscriptions in order to survive and to maintain the standards it has offered in the past and which members expect. The increasing cost of printing, postage, the hiring of venues, insurance etc. engorges our funds. Without an increase in membership the HTAI cannot function and the work it does on behalf of history will cease. On the other hand, the greater its numerical strength, the more effective the HTAI can be in achieving its aims.

The work of the HTAI is now more vital than ever. Despite a new Leaving Certificate history syllabus coming on stream in September 2004 and proposed reforms at Junior Certificate level in the offing, history as a subject remains under threat. The initial delight following an increase in the numbers (for the first time in many years) taking History for the Leaving Certificate in 2003, has been dampened by a down turn in the figures for 2004.

Pro-active role

As history teachers we should all seek to play a more pro-active role in promoting history within our schools. We should try to influence the time tabling of history and speak out regarding subject choices and options at senior cycle level? It is true that there has always been a positive attitude and good will towards the HTAI. But this must now be translated into active membership through participation and involvement in its activities.

Word of mouth is also important, particularly for younger history teachers or those teaching in rural areas who often find themselves isolated from their history teaching colleagues. The setting up of new branches only requires a few determined and dedicated history teachers to take the initiative. They can be assured of every support and back up from the executive of the HTAI. Therefore if you are concerned about the place of history in our schools and the quality of history teaching, seek out and join your local branch of the HTAI and get your colleagues to do so also. That is the way forward.

Peter Gallagher, President, HTAI