

## Garret FitzGerald

I shall start by identifying what seem to me to be key characteristics of the Irish educational system which, taken together limit our capacity to provide as good a service to our young as we would wish to do. Our concern at this moment must be to prevent the weaknesses of our educational system from being further aggravated in our current crisis – whilst recognising the need for and supporting the scale of the huge fiscal adjustments needed to save us from a collapse of our economy.

Next I will discuss the consequences of the collapse of authority in our society, which raises the question of the key role of teachers in this situation.

What we need to do is, I believe, to develop and promote the concept of civic republicanism, which is exceptionally weak in our society

Amongst other things, this will, I believe, require a re-evaluation of the nature of politics; the development of a new moral attitude to taxation; and a serious effort to create a more realistic approach to sexual issues

### KEY FEATURES OF THE IRISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

1. No pre-school
2. Proportion of 4-25 age group in population about one-third higher than in rest of Europe.
3. But share of GNP devoted to education no higher @ 5.5%  
Consequently education greatly under-resourced
4. Worse pupil/teacher ratio

	Pupil/Teacher Ratio
Primary	+4%
Lower Sec	+13%

5. But one of highest third level degree graduation rates in Europe- 45%  
Exceeded only by Demark, Finland & Iceland  
Almost one-quarter higher than European average of 36.7%. One-sixth higher than UK  
One half of manual workers' children enter higher education

**Standard of Irish degrees.** No hard data, but recognised as at or above European average. So, quantitatively better and qualitatively as good as or better than rest of Europe.

How achieve this result - given lack of resources and large school classes?

ANSWER

High motivation of parents and pupils; partly due to historical urge of Catholic majority to improve on second-class status. 18<sup>th</sup> century hedge schools. And 12,500 schools by 1824 – before national schools initiated in 1831.

Moreover high parental and pupil motivation reinforced by strong motivation of teachers –due to their high pay - purchasing power of which has been higher than in rest of Europe – Germany excepted.

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Current threat to education – Cuts.

Anything that affects scale or quality of education, or that hits less-well-off should be avoided. Class sizes crucial for disadvantaged but not for the rest. That is the wrong issue to fight.

In Portugal primary class size is 10, but quality of education poor – because too many small schools, and teacher quality low. Opposite in Ireland

But cuts like school-books funding intolerable –now to be reversed. . (Leaving Cert books almost €500). Impossible for someone on social welfare to find that money. Such children put at a disadvantage. Cost of reversal of some of these stupid cuts is low.

But all in our society - including especially teachers, who have key leadership role in society, should face up to need for €4 bn. fiscal tightening (or €6 bn. because of this year's €2 bn slippage in revenue?)

Reluctance to face this reality is highly dangerous – failure to implement this adjustment could be fatal to our capacity to continue borrowing €1 bn. every two and a half weeks – upon which we depend for payment of public servants. Everything is now at risk, given highly negative state of public opinion and signs of panic by politicians – e.g. Labour's dangerous proposal to spread our fiscal adjustments over a longer period, and Brian Lenihan's attempt to abandon the tax increases that were announced last April despite the fact this would almost treble the scale of spending cuts to be made. Clearly cuts on this scale would have to involve some combination of a social welfare freeze, taxation or means-testing of child benefit, and further cuts in public service pay.

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### **What of the future of Irish education?**

Whatever prospect there might have been of financing education more adequately before the Government wrecked the economy by their inflationary spending earlier this decade, and their failure to tackle the housing bubble, there is now little prospect of any government being able to do this within the next three or four years – or perhaps even longer. But whilst recognising this reality we should all use these years to stimulate public recognition of the need to make educational funding a priority when we get beyond recovery period

### **Huge Surge Under Way In Student Numbers**

First of all we are about to face a huge increase in the number of children to be educated. Within seven years, viz. by 2016, the number of primary pupils will have risen by one quarter – even if in this economic crisis the birth rate, currently at a record level, starts to fall. And within thirteen years, viz, by 2022, the number in secondary education will be almost 50% higher than to-day. On top of that we clearly need to provide increased funding per pupil.

I don't think our politicians have any inkling of the demands our educational system will be making national resources during the dozen or so years ahead - when we will also be facing a large increase in the number of older people to be looked after. Politicians are currently backing away from necessary taxation increases in what is now the most grossly under-taxed country in Western Europe. This suggests a lack of seriousness about our affairs - reflecting an ill-informed and irresponsible public opinion

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## **CSPC**

This brings me to my next point. You as teachers have the responsibility to educate the next generation to become responsible and well-informed citizens of our state. I do not have the impression that this responsibility is at present being adequately discharged, because you are not being adequately resourced for this purpose. The failure of the Dept. of Education to include CSPC on the senior cycle deprives you of the chance to carry this work forward beyond Junior Cycle. I find this incomprehensible. Just when pupils are reaching the age at which they have the capacity to absorb the kind of material they will need in order to become constructive citizens of the future, the state deprives them of this essential input. Review of this currently under way – but will it be implemented in present circumstances?

But the failure to prepare our young people to become constructive citizens of the state is not all the fault of the state. I met some years ago with some of the teachers who are responsible for the CSPC course at Junior cycle, and I was enormously impressed by their commitment. But perhaps those I met were a minority for I am constantly hearing complaints who allege that in far too many schools the teachers allocated to this work are ill-equipped for it, and that all too often the subject is not taken seriously.