# Speech by Gerard Craughwell in response to Minister Quinn

Minister for Education and Skills

Kilkenny

Wednesday 23rd April, 2014

Tá fáilte romhat, a Aire, agus a aoíonna uaisle chuig Comhdháil Bhliaintúil Aontas Múinteoirí Éireann.

Minister, last year I welcomed you to Galway, my home town. This year I am happy to welcome you to Kilkenny, my wife’s home county. Again, on my own behalf, and on behalf of the Teachers’ Union of Ireland, I extend to you a respectful and courteous welcome.

Last year, Minister, you found yourself sitting for more than an hour while I responded to your address to our Annual Congress in Galway. I had a lot to say to you, Minister. I know that it’s not easy, Minister. It’s not easy to sit through a long period of time you are not paid for, feeling trapped; and perhaps even feeling that advantage is being taken of your goodwill and professionalism. If you felt that way, Minister, my colleagues and I can empathise with you. We know those feelings all too well. We endure it 33 times a year. It was not intentional on my part last year, Minister, but I cannot help but wonder if you experienced the frustration of teachers by one of the most hated of all of the measures inflicted on them as a result of the Public Service Agreement 2010 - 2014. Minister, that was, for you, I’m sure, the equivalent of a “Croke Park” detention hour.

As you are aware, Minister, discussions have commenced on the usage of the “Croke Park” hours. Minister, setting aside the insult to the professionalism of teachers in these detention hours, I ask that you instruct your officials to ensure that the hours are put to more productive use. Do this in ways that are more respectful of teachers. Surely, Minister, in safeguarding teaching time, you did not intend that teachers would incur additional childcare and travel costs to attend meetings, the merit of which is often reported as being dubious – at best. Why can’t teachers’ individual commitment be counted, Minister? Why do teachers have to be herded up and corralled together? If professional development is a good use of the 33 hours, why is it only counted if it is undertaken by everyone together, at the same time? It is ridiculous that the personal professional development of teachers, undertaken by teachers outside school time, is not recognised. And why are the many co-curricular and extra-curricular activities undertaken by individual teachers not counted? These hours are demeaning, Minister. Demeaning. They belittle teachers and are, in their present form, a box-ticking exercise of little net value to the school community.

You often plead mitigation, Minister, by arguing that we no longer have the resources to rectify a particular problem that should be resolved. There is nowhere to hide on this issue, Minister, because it is not an issue of resources: rectifying the punitive conditions which apply to the “33” hours does not cost money. This is about goodwill. It is about respect. It is past time that some modicum of respect was extended to teachers. It is available to you, Minister, to ease the needless antagonism of teachers by ensuring that these Croke Park hours may be devoted to a broader range of activities undertaken by teachers

* whether on an individual, group or collective basis
* whether within school or outside school (without infringing on teaching time) or
* whether of an hour’s length or less.

Minister, these hours must be put to use in locally-determined, flexible, family-friendly and teacher-friendly arrangements. Frankly, Minister, this is the very least you should do. My succinctness this year will be your initial reward. The ongoing respect of teachers will be a more enduring reward.

Minister, you have shared with us some of the benefits you perceive in the plan to merge institutes of technology and develop technological universities. We are not convinced. To date, we have been offered no convincing rationale for the proposal, and a significant percentage of our members want to continue working in stand-alone IOTs. That’s a reasonable position, Minister, because, of all the sectors in which we organise, we can fairly say that the IOT sector is not broken. And you know what the old saying is, Minister: “If it’s not broken, don’t fix it”. If the merging of IOTs is not intended as another cost-saving exercise and an opportunity to dismantle lecturers’ conditions of service, then confirm to us, formally, Minister, that provision at Levels 6 to 10 will be retained; that student pathways will not be narrowed; that the focus on quality and shared services is not driven by the ongoing rationalisation and austerity craze; and that our members’ conditions of service will be safeguarded. Confirm to us, Minister, that no effort will be made to meddle with or dismantle lecturers’ conditions of service.

We are not impressed, Minister, by the failure of your Department, the presidents of the Institutes of Technology and the HEA, to engage in meaningful consultation with the academic staff of institutes. Minister, as the presidents and senior managers of our IoTs sit around tables planning the future of this sector, is there anyone from the coalface sitting beside them? Minister consultation, negotiation and debate are vital for the success of any project. Sadly, in education, the Official Side seems to be afraid of this. Wisdom is not the preserve of ministers, presidents, CEOs or senior managers. We should not fear what the practitioners have to say, Minister. They might surprise all of us!

The IOT sector is distinguished by the gold-standard excellence of its education provision, devised, as it is, by innovative and committed members of this Union. Your government, Minister, is running a real risk of killing the goose that laid the golden egg. Minister, our lecturers are being pushed to breaking point as a result of government policies. Class sizes are close to overcrowding, class contact time for lecturers has increased to unworkable levels and resources are being stretched beyond capacity. Minister, as a matter of urgency, you must cut lecturing hours if we are to continue to deliver the standard of education we are famous for. You must also, as a matter of urgency, resource our IoTs better. Regardless of future developments in respect of merging, clustering or fully-fledged amalgamation, you must act on these issues now.

Minister let me now turn to the commoditisation of the education system, something which is being driven not for educational reasons but for profit. Some profiteers want to turn our education system into a cash cow. Whether through blended learning, elearning platforms such as Moodle and multi-media software, the provision of online courses, the provision of further education and training or the provision of inservice training for teachers, for-profit, private sector companies are circling like buzzards. I am warning them now. Our teachers and lecturers will not have it. We will not allow education, which is a basic human right, to be turned into a for-profit commodity where only those who can afford it, can avail of it. Minister, you can restore confidence amongst teachers and lecturers by declaring that government funding of education provision and related tertiary services, both directly by your Department and indirectly, through agencies such as SOLAS, for example, will be allocated to public service providers.

Minister, you have sometimes stated that we have lost our autonomy. Well, let me turn to an area over which you have significant control - that is those state boards appointed through your department. Minister, the TUI asked you for representation, or better representation, on a number of boards: the HEA, SOLAS and ETBs, to name a few. We did so because we care about the education and training systems we build and we want to ensure that our voice is heard loud and clear. We are the practitioners. We are the experts.

Last year, I asked you, in particular, to appoint a member of the TUI to the board of SOLAS. You continue to ignore that request. Surely, you know that teachers in the PLC/FE sector are the drivers of the sector, innovating and delivering education and training programs since the 1980s, despite the absence of formal recognition. I am deeply disappointed that you have excluded the workforce when it came to appointments to the board of SOLAS. There were so many good people available to you who could have made a great contribution to this board but you chose the managers and the employer representatives instead. Did you once look to those you appointed and ask what contribution they have made to the innovation that built the further education and sector? Minister, you are losing a great opportunity. Minister, there is an urgent need for a change of mind-set in this country. Decision-makers at all levels must recognise their workforce as equals who have valuable contributions to make, not as useless tools of production.

With respect to the Education and Training Boards, Minister, we asked at the time that the heads of bill were published for a greater number of teachers to be elected to these boards, but instead you increased the number of politicians. I wonder, Minister, what you expect the political members of these boards to bring to the table that could possibly be of more import than the trained and qualified professionals working within the sector. Was the make-up of these boards more about politics than it was about what was good for education and training, and more importantly – what was good for the student?

Minister, when this government came to power it promised an end to the old ways. I suppose your current slogan could be “Much undone, more to undo”. From where I am standing, however, little has changed: cronyism, nepotism and disregard for workers is still the order of the day.

Minister, I would like to address the issue of the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest legislation that your government enacted last year. Many trade unionists said that it was inconceivable that the Labour Party would ever pass legislation to cut unilaterally the pay of workers. This, after all, is the political party which traces its birth to organised labour; whose draft constitution was proposed at the Irish Trades Unions Congress in Clonmel in 1914 – hometown of our respected trade unionist and General Secretary, John MacGabhann, by the way. And at the same conference in Clonmel, one hundred years ago – in recognition of the inextricable links between the trade movement and the Labour Party – the Irish Trades Unions Congress changed its own name to the Irish Trades Unions Congress and Labour Party. We trusted the so-called party of the working class, and we were let down; and let down badly.

Minister, your government has been telling us for some months now that the emergency is nearly over; one more tough budget and we are back on track, or words to that effect. (Indeed, you have told us more of the same today). The government has achieved, through the Croke Park and Haddington Road Agreements, more than should ever have been asked of public servants. FEMPI was the thinly-veiled threat, to bring workers into compliance with those agreements. It is time now that the government recognises our contribution and repeals the FEMPI legislation, immediately.

Minister, as we emerge from austerity, we are conscious that we have taken more than our fair share of a responsibility; a responsibility that should never have been put upon the workers of this country. We have, nonetheless, made our contribution to save this nation’s economy. Now is the time to repay our efforts. Minister, the worm is turning. We, the workers of this nation, are realising that, although we were not responsible for the worst excesses of greed that caused this nation’s economic downfall, we have been, and continue to be, hugely important to this nation’s recovery. Minister, at your first visit to a TUI congress you referred to our nation’s loss of economic sovereignty. The Troika have left town, Minister, and this nation has, through both the sacrifices and the efforts of the public service, begun to regain its economic sovereignty. Yesterday, the delegates of this

Congress voted to lodge pay claims and I am telling you now, Minister - and your colleagues, Ministers Howlin and Noonan - that you may expect our call.

Minister, speaking of the better times ahead, there is one wrong you can right for teachers – right now. You can equalise teachers’ salary scales, as has already been done elsewhere in the public service. For a Labour government to preside over a breach of the principle of ‘equal pay for equal work’ is untenable. It was, after all, the coalition government, including the Labour Party, which introduced the Anti-Pay Discrimination Act, in 1974. The time has come to bring all teachers onto the same common basic pay scale. After all, Minister, there was no NQT scale for new entrants to Dáil Éireann! Respect your young and new teachers, Minister. Abolish the new entrants’ rates immediately.

And, on the matter of new entrants – and not-so-new, new entrants – there is much you have to do. You are presiding over an education system that obliges its newly-appointed teachers and lecturers to suffer the indignity and poverty of years of part-time teaching. These are the most vulnerable teachers. Principles know that newly-appointed teachers have no choice other than to accept whatever scraps of work schools offer, in whatever conditions. These teachers know how vulnerable they are to the scrap heap of redundancy; knowing that their period of apprenticeship last several years – and that’s even assuming that their employment isn’t riddled with short periods of work with many different employers.

Minister, it is a blight on teaching and lecturing in Ireland that almost a third of all teachers and lecturers are employed on piecemeal and part-time hours. Minister, the requirement to redress this is the most urgent task you face. We ask you to ensure the creation for the forthcoming academic session of permanent whole-time teaching and lecturing jobs. You may wish that your legacy to education would be defined differently, Minister, but we believe that ending the cancer of part-time teaching and lecturing would be a noble and righteous legacy to leave. Minister, this is an emergency. We ask you to act on it with the urgency and moral conviction that it requires.

Minister, on the matter of junior cycle reform, I regret that I have to say that we are not amused by your gentle chiding and disparaging of us, by metaphors of boats embarking and so on. By noting to us that all the other education partners are engaging actively. By telling us it is time to lead on the issue. Minister, we determine our views and our policies, not you. Do you actually think you are winning friends and influencing people in your discourse and approach? That you are getting us on board? Excuse the pun. We haven’t purchased any tickets for your trip, Minister.

I want to address the real issues, Minister. The very first thing I have to say about your Junior Cycle Framework proposals is this: why have you allowed this project to proceed, as far as it has, without proper engagement with the professional teachers you need to make it work? Do you seriously believe your plan can be implemented without our consent? Are you foolish enough to believe that we are so eroded by your treatment of us that we have lost the capacity to fight back? Minister, not only are we not eroded, we are not even denuded! On this issue, attitudes are not being weathered, they are hardening. Our position is rock solid! Attitudes are hardening, and there’s an increasing polarisation of our positions. I think we should think twice before we consciously de-couple, like Chris Martin and Gwyneth Paltrow. We should think twice before we go our separate ways, irredeemably, Minister.

Why? Why did you discard the proposals on assessment and certification given to you by the NCCA, a body established to advise you as Minister on educational matters? The NCCA proposal of 40% for internal assessment and 60% for an externally-assessed terminal examination mirror the Scottish model, the Nationals 5; one of the education systems you have frequently invoked to justify your proposals. Indeed, although cast as new to us, your proposals mirror examples of emergent trends in curriculum prescription in other jurisdictions, such as the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, the New Zealand Framework curriculum and even England’s National Curriculum. Your proposals, with their emphasis, for example, on learning outcomes and competence-based qualifications demonstrated against performance criteria – all packaged in proselytising rhetoric – represent the development of market ideology in the public sector.

Minister, you assert that your change will be transformational or transformative, or whatever. The premise of such thinking is that if it’s transformational, it has to be good! Silly, me!

* You say that there are many good reasons for doing what you are doing. We say that there are many good reasons not to do what you are doing.
* You say we must hurry. We say that it is better to do it right than do it quick. Act in haste, repent at leisure, Minister!
* You say that your proposals will foster innovative, experiential learning. We say that learning is about “what”, as well as “how”.
* You say that there is excessive “teaching to the test” and “rote learning” in our schools. We say that that understanding is very overstated and, frankly, an unfair and disparaging “put down” of Irish teachers. We say that learning doesn’t happen by accident, it’s hard work! We say that it doesn’t happen by osmosis. We say that learning is not only about “how”: it is also about “what”. We say that sometimes its drudgery but a modest amount of “learning off by heart” is actually required!
* You say that higher-order programmes and curricula will – and I quote you directly, Minister “provide our young people with the skills they need, for life and for learning. Teamwork, communication skills, being creative, and managing information are some of the key skills that will be the focus of the JCSA”. We say that your prescription for higher-order programmes and learning may result in some very thin learning.
* You say that the current externally-examined Junior Certificate terminal exam places excessive pressure on pupils, and you extol the merit of the abolition in 1969 of the Primary Certificate. We say that that is really clutching at straws. Aw, come on! The abolition of the old Primary Cert has little enough to do with abolition of externally-corrected and state certified terminal examinations at junior cycle level. We say that the current system does place some pressure on pupils. We say that we don’t consider it excessive or unsustainable. In fact, we say that many teenagers need the discipline and rigour and challenge that the Junior Certificate presents. We also say that 17 or 18 is too old an age for pupils to experience their first national exam.
* And, finally, it is said that your proposals are regarded as avant garde and bold. We say that they mimic reform in other countries which has not always been successful. We say that your proposals are bold in the sense “naughty”.

These differences create the ground for debate, Minister; for consultation and discourse; and, ultimately, for negotiation.

Minister, you have conceded on the floor of Dáil Éireann on 21 January 2014 that cost was a major factor in your decision to abolish independent State assessment at Junior Certificate level. We say that cost should not be placed ahead of best practice when it comes to educating our children.

Minister, to take the proposals given to you by the NCCA and discard some significant parts of those proposals without open debate or consultation with some of the key stakeholders has left teachers, as professionals, lacking belief and faith in your proposals. You must know by now that teachers see your proposals as flawed and will not co-operate with them.

Minister, it is with the greatest of respect that I invite us all to commit to a new discussion. If this matter is to be resolved without tears, I wish that we all commit to respectful and inclusive consultation and negotiation on your proposals.

Minister, you know I have a lot of respect for you and I am confident that that you respect me too. Please trust me Minister, I have travelled the length and breadth of this country during my presidency and from Tory island to the heart of the capital, I have seen a quality of professionalism in my members - your employees and this nation’s teachers - that leaves me humbled. Look at the room in front of you, Minister. These delegates represent what is, perhaps, the nation’s greatest resource, its educators.

These delegates represent teachers that have, through a democratic ballot, told you Minister that they have no confidence in your changes. Their vast and learned experience tells them that your proposals are not currently worthy of their students, the future of this nation. Minister there is still, however, a way to move this project forward and work together. Delay the implementation date for a year. Engage in a national public debate where the voices of all partners, especially my members, the professionals, are heard. This process would provide your department with the time to work with teachers and with school management to ensure that the resources are in place for this exciting development in Irish education. I am talking about the ICT infrastructure, the management positions, the basics such as a room to store project work, reporting software for results, the simple things which are essential for a successful programme to run.

Lest there be any doubt, Minister: as of right now teachers are fundamentally opposed to any Junior Certificate or Junior Cycle Student Award that is not externally assessed and does not carry state certification. Minister, the Junior Certificate may not be a high stakes examination, but that is no reason to make it a low quality certificate. As professionals, teachers will not allow the Junior Certificate to be downgraded to the status of a glorified house exam.

Minister, TUI members understand your desire to get your changes implemented as soon as possible. Indeed, no one understands the need for a legacy more than I do; after all, I too am coming to the end of my term of office. Minister, I know it takes courage to change direction. I have had to do so a number of times during my Presidency. The stakes, though, are too high to let pride detract from our goal to provide a world class education system for our students. It is time to engage properly with your teachers and the wider community of partners and together, let us as partners, map out a - Junior Cycle Student Award - we can all be proud of. A legacy, created at the dawn of what we hope will be a fairer nation as we travel the road to recovery. Minister, I urge you, let us set an example for the future and work on this together. Let us work in equal, respectful, partnership.

Minister, I have to turn to the effects cuts are having on our schools. The increases in the pupil-teacher ratio over the last number of years have had devastating effects at second level and in further education. Key posts such as year head, and the provision of ex-quota guidance have been lost. Special Education needs allocations have been decimated. Now, some of our schools are frightening places, Minister. Quite frightening. Some of our teachers, quite frankly, wake up in dread of their working day as teachers. Some of our teachers start their working day wondering if they will be the next unwitting and undeserving victim of threatening and violent pupil behaviour. I wish to serve notice to school employers. The TUI has adopted a zero tolerance policy on your almost total tolerance of intolerable pupil behaviour. We have adopted a policy of zero tolerance on your absolute neglect of your obligation, under health and safety legislation, to provide safe systems of work for teachers, your employees. We are coming for your risk assessments of challenging pupil behaviour. We are coming for your safety statements. Have them ready, please. Notice has been served!

Schools are creaking. While some of the cracks have been painted over, through the voluntary and unrecognised efforts of our members, this cannot, and will not last. It cannot because it is unsustainable. The education system is a camel. Its back is sore. Just one more straw will break the camel’s back, Minister! Minister, you must realise that my members can’t keep carrying the can. We cannot continue to do more with less. You are not giving us enough to provide the basics, Minister. Above all else, our students do not deserve the level of compromise that endless austerity has created.

Finally, Minister, you may have identified that a theme of this speech is my frustration, and that of my members, at the lack of consultation with us. My final wish, Minister, is that government would realise the part that we, the workers, are playing in recovery. In that realisation, I would hope that you, Minister - and your government - would recognise the vital service to this society that we as public servants, that we, as professionals and that we, as teachers and lecturers, provide. Show us the respect with which we deserve to be treated, the respect that we have earned

I thank you for your time, Minister, and I do, sincerely, look forward to discussing these issues with you further. I hope you give me and my members, that opportunity. Show us the respect you claim to have for us. Consult with us.

Thank you, Minister.

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