

Is history saved? The Dail debates Junior Certificate history

By Elma Collins

In 1995 the Minister for Education, Niamh Bhreathnach, published a White Paper on Education called *Charting our Educational Future*. The White Paper said:

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 have a recognised full course in at least one creative or performing art.

History and geography, included in the core curriculum for secondary (though not for vocational or comprehensive) school students since the foundation of the state, were nowhere mentioned in the White Paper, although they had been included as core subjects in the earlier Green Paper, *Education for a Changing World*. No reasons were given for this change of policy nor had it been endorsed by the NCCA which had twice recommended the retention of both subjects. If the White Paper, which is a statement of government policy and not a mere discussion document, went through on these terms, the place of history and geography as separate disciplines on the Junior Cycle was clearly under threat.

The History Teachers' Association quickly launched a campaign to alert the public to the possibility that history might disappear from the Junior cycle in our schools. The university departments of history, and the Irish Conference of Historical Sciences, once the situation was drawn to their attention, were very supportive.

Soon a flood of letters opposing the dropping of history were appearing in the newspapers. Many otherwise uninvolved citizens expressed their horror at the prospect that students might leave school without the opportunity to study, in a systematic and rational way, the myths and the realities of our past. Support for the retention of history and geography came from a variety of sources, including leading articles in several newspapers and the main teaching unions where motions opposing the dropping of history and geography were passed at the annual conferences.

In the Dail, Deputies of all parties also expressed unease at the Minister's policy but opposition questions to the Minister did not receive an adequate answer.

'Then in May the Fianna Fail spokesman on Education, Michel Martin, put down a motion which asked the Dail to declare 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 ... to include history and geography as core subjects in the Junior Certificate curriculum. (Dail Debates, Vol 466, no. 1, 258)

The motion, the first on a curriculum issue in the history of the state, was due to be debated on 28 May, 1996. Some days before that the Minister made her first public reference to the subject, assuring everyone that history and geography were safe in her hands and announced that she had referred the matter to the NCCA for a judgement.

When the Fianna Fail motion came before Dáil Éireann, the debate was spread over two nights (28/29 May). Moving his motion, Micheál Martin (FF) said.

We should be clear about the status of a White Paper. It represents a policy decision by the government. In relation to its treatment of history and geography, that position needs to be reversed and the White Paper amended... to include history and geography as core subjects in the Junior Certificate curriculum. 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. (Ibid 261-2)

In reply, the Minister moved an amendment to the Fianna Fail motion to the effect that the Dail endorses the commitment in the White Paper to promote and develop in pupils a knowledge and appreciation of their social and cultural heritage and environment and welcomes the Minister's commitment to maintain the status of history and geography as core curriculum subjects in the Junior Cycle. (Ibid, 274)

Speaking at length, she sought to reassure Deputies that pupils would still study history and geography, but she spoke also of the need to adapt the curriculum to the changing times. Having pointed out the need to develop the "basic survival skills" of literacy and numeracy, she continued:

In addition, pupils must have an awareness and appreciation of the visual arts, music and physical education. They also need to have a knowledge of their heritage and environment. It is in this area that history and geography play a role.

The government has also give a commitment in the White Paper that pupils will have opportunities to study modern continental languages, science and the new technologies. There is also the requirement that the new areas of study, civic, social, and political education and relationships and sexuality education are included. How will it be possible to incorporate the range of other subjects which are optional in an already busy curriculum? It is a constant problem for principals to reconcile the demands of competing subjects in a timetable which is increasingly overloaded. We need to

consider the possibility of integrating the acquisition of knowledge and introducing more inter- disciplinary and cross-disciplinary work into our schools, even at junior cycle level. (Ibid, 280-8 1)

The Minister then went on to say that she was bringing in a compulsory examination in a new area, civic, social and political education, in 1997, presumably an example of the "inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary work" to which she referred and she continued that the importance she attached to history and geography could be seen in the Department's support of European Studies. (Ibid, 282-83)

In the debate which followed, fifteen TDs from all parties spoke and one and all agreed on the importance of history and geography and the impossibility of dropping them. The Minister's statement that she supported the retention of history and geography and did not intend to remove them from the curriculum reassured deputies from the government parties such as Jim Kemmy and Kathleen Lynch who spoke eloquently on the importance of history in the education of our young people.

But opposition deputies were more sceptical. Helen Keogh (PD) said:

What many teachers took from those (the Minister's) comments was that, in some way, one could include history and geography as a module along the way, that one could dip in and out, gain some sketchy information or knowledge. (Dail Debates, Vol 466, no 2,598)

And Micheál Martin, in closing the debate noted that the Minister had not altered the White Paper, which was a statement of government policy and warned 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 ...

The White Paper lays great stress on the importance of the European dimension to education but I wonder if the authors 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 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' point of view." It seems that those who wrote the White Paper never bothered to look at the various reports from the Council of Europe...

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 the 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 ... (Ibid, 608-10)

Following the debate, the Minister's amendment to the Fianna Fail motion was passed by 69 votes to 57.

So is history safe in the Minister's hands? Certainly many people who became involved in the debate both in the Dail and outside it seemed to think so. Letters to the papers ceased after her statements and the concern for the future of history died away. But how should history teachers feel about these developments? Should we too accept that history has been saved as a core subject in the curriculum?

It is of course gratifying that so many people should be concerned about the future of our subject, that the Dail should debate its place in the school curriculum and that the attitude shown towards it by all TDs who spoke should be so positive.

But it seems to me that we should not be too complacent about the outcome. As the above extract from the Minister's speech shows, her commitment to history is limited. She has promised that it will remain part of the core curriculum, not that it will continue to be a core subject and that is an important distinction. What she and her officials almost certainly want is not history as we know it - that is a systematic survey of the development of our society and of our place in the modern world -but rather a hodgepodge of bits and pieces of history and geography fitted into an "inter- disciplinary" study called "social and political studies" or "European studies". Students will certainly study history and geography at some time during their Junior Cycle, but not in any systematic way.

This approach to history has been tried in our primary schools, where, in spite of what the curriculum says, history is in trouble. (See the article: "A future for our past?" by Pauric Travers of St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, in *History Ireland*, Autumn 1996) It was tried in Britain where they discovered that teachers, trained in separate subjects, were unable to cope with "inter-disciplinary" teaching, so that the separate components (history, geography and so on) were badly taught. They are now regretting the policy and moving away from it. It has not been tried in continental Europe where, as the Council of Europe report quoted by Micheál Martin shows, the value of history as a method of developing citizenship and reconciling past differences, is appreciated.

A good deal will depend on the reply of the NCCA to the Minister's request for advice. If she gets the answer she wants, i.e. that the curriculum is too packed to allow space for the separate teaching of history, we will be back where we started with history in danger of disappearing from the Junior Cycle of second level schools. It is important for HTAI and for individual history teachers to remain on the alert and to be ready to return to the fray if the threat to history recurs.