

**History has a very bright future in our Junior Cert classrooms**

**Ruairi Quinn – 13 April 2013**

**THE historian Diarmaid Ferriter recently penned an opinion piece for the Irish Independent appealing to me not to bring about "the end of history" as we reform the Junior Cycle. I can assure him that the plans I have for the radical overhaul of the first three years of post-primary schooling will not see the end of this important subject.**

**Contrary to popular belief, history is not a compulsory Junior Cycle subject in all post-primary schools. Last year, 5,000 students did not take the subject in their Junior Certificate exams. However, history will be embedded into the very heart of the curriculum for all students under the new Framework for Junior Cycle which I announced late last year.**

**I believe students will no longer miss out on the chance to build on their study of history in primary school, to develop the critical and analytical skills of the historian. They will, as Prof Ferriter suggests, discover that history can take you anywhere.**

**Under the Framework, every school will have to ensure that every student "values local, national and international heritage, (and) understands the importance of the relationship between past and current events and the forces that drive change". This is one of the 24 statements of learning underpinning the new Junior Cycle programme that must apply to every student, without exception.**

**The only subjects which will be mandatory in the new Junior Cycle are English, Irish and Maths. This does not mean all other subjects are 'second-class'. I believe that the more subjects that are made compulsory, the less choice there is for students, and for schools to reflect the breadth of interest of their pupils.**

**I agree with Prof Ferriter that to have no knowledge of the past "is to be permanently burdened with a lack of perspective, empathy and wisdom". We are introducing much needed changes to the Junior Cycle which will liberate students, and yes, their teachers, from the tyranny of teaching to the test, rote learning and a narrowly focused terminal exam. To equate these long overdue reforms with the end of History or other subjects is simply wrong.**

**Given the importance we as a people place on history and the high quality of our history teachers, the subject will remain a core element of the curriculum in schools.**

**Our enthusiastic teachers will also have the opportunity to inspire further study through the option for short courses that will be introduced. The short courses innovation will allow, for example, young people in Enniscorthy to study in depth the 1798 Battle of Vinegar Hill, which took place on their doorstep, or teenagers in Trim to examine Norman Castles, the largest Irish example of which dominates that town.**

**The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is working with a network of 48 schools to plan the first Junior Cycle programmes offered under the new Framework. Not one of those schools, of different sizes and in different locations, has suggested 'dropping' history.**

**Beyond the school gates, there is a wealth of opportunities here for historians, or historical and heritage organisations, to devise their own short courses to make available as an option to schools. The decade of commemoration, 1912-1923, which is also referenced by Prof Ferriter in his article, is another excellent chance for teachers to be creative in examining this period which led to the foundation of the State.**

**If the current Junior Cycle remained, schools would have little or no flexibility to make the most of that opportunity, outside Transition Year.**

**Students too will have a wider choice of historical periods to study, periods which interest them. I gave up History for my Leaving Cert because I did not have an interest in medieval European history. In my opinion, politicians and particularly socialists have a predilection towards history. One only has to think of Karl Marx or, closer to home, James Connolly, to recognise the fundamental importance of history to political discourse.**

**The end of History? Far from it. Junior Cycle reform gives schools and teachers the opportunity to reinvigorate their engagement with the past – and to bring a subject I hold in very high regard to all of our young people. History is a compulsory subject for students in voluntary secondary schools, but not for those in vocational schools and community colleges.**

**Ruairi Quinn TD is the Minister for Education and Skills**

**<http://www.independent.ie/opinion/analysis/ruairi-quinn-history-has-a-very-bright-future-in-our-junior-cert-classrooms-29193503.html>**