



3ª CONFERÊNCIA NACIONAL ENSINO SUPERIOR E INVESTIGAÇÃO

Afirmar o papel estratégico
do Ensino Superior e da Ciência

**PAPER BASED ON THE CONTRIBUTION MADE
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TO FENPROF CONFERENCE, LISBON, 5 NOVEMBER 2011**

It is interesting that as I speak today's newspapers are reporting that the Irish Government is going to cut 3.8 billion euro from the budget this year despite the fact that the Agreement with the Troica only requires a cut of 3.6 billion. Obviously the Irish Government is intent on being the "best boy in class" as far as the international markets are concerned.

This leads me to spend a few moments looking at what we might call the national psychology or the national sentiment as occurs in various countries.

The situation in Greece is almost always portrayed as chaotic. We see daily coverage of riots and civil disturbance. The Greek people appear or are represented as being in denial about their economic situation and out of touch with reality.

In France but more particularly in Germany we hear that the public sentiment blames the Greeks for having "lived beyond their means" and for being "lazy".

In Ireland it is remarkable that there have been no riots and very little protests despite the fact that our Government insists on not seeking additional funds and as I have already said, making even more austerity cuts than might be strictly necessary. You might ask, what is the explanation for this apparent passivity? I believe it is because for

the most part the Irish people blame themselves (or rather they blame their own political class and their own Government) for the disaster which has befallen us.

Irish people are very conscious of the fact that we squandered the prosperity generated during the so-called Celtic Tiger period. We did not invest in education. We did not invest in a health service. We did not build-up our social infrastructure. Instead we used our wealth to promote a culture of individualism and tax cuts.

The Irish people appear to have taken a decision not to go on to the streets to protest, but to exact their revenge at the ballot box by voting against the outgoing Government. This they did in spectacular fashion earlier this year when the two outgoing parties were decimated by the electorate. One of the follow-on effects of that is that our current Government, which is made up of a Coalition of, in European terms, a Christian Democratic and a Social Democratic Party, is still enjoying a “honeymoon period” after months being in office. How long that will last is open to question.

Another major factor in the Irish response is that we are coming out of over 20 years of “Social Partnership”. That is, the involvement of the trade unions, the Government and the employers in tripartite talks on all aspects of Irish economic and social life. Although Social Partnership is now effectively ended, there is still to some degree the remnants of it in the negotiations which have taken place to put together a new deal or a new concordat. This agreement, which was finalised in a football stadium and so bears the title the ‘Croke Park’ Agreement, provides a trade-off as follows. The Government commits to no further compulsory pay cuts for public servants (although taxation changes are not precluded) and, in addition, there is a pledge that there will be no further compulsory redundancies. In return for this the Public Service trade unions have committed to a full range of productivity measures to achieve savings to satisfy the Government’s requirements.

Now I wouldn’t want you to think that this agreement meant that my members were spared any hardship or pain. In fact the opposite is the truth. The first attack was by way of a tax on Public Sector workers of from 3% for the lowest paid up to 10% for higher

grades. This was called a “Pension Levy”. But this title was only designed to capitalise upon the media-generated hostility to “pampered” public servants who were allegedly enjoying “massive pension benefits”.

At the same time all recruitment and promotions and all allowances e.g. Head of Department/Head of School allowances were abolished overnight. These measures were followed by a straightforward salary cut of 5% for the lowest paid up to 10% for those in higher grades. In addition to all of the above the starting pay for new public servants was cut by a further 10%. If this wasn't bad enough, teachers were now required also to work an extra hour per week without any additional payments.

My union was the last union to sign this new National Agreement. At the time, one of our slogans was “there are worse things than pay cuts”. This brings me to a very important point. I think there is a danger for us that we may not “see the wood for the trees”. What this means is that we may fail to see the big picture because we're so fixated on the small and immediate picture. There is no doubt whatever that it can be argued that pay cuts can be reversed. Indeed, in the sort of free-market economy that we live in it is almost inevitable that the recession will end and will be accompanied by a period of at least relative prosperity. But other changes which may be extracted from us will unfortunately be irreversible.

One of Barak Obama's Senior Advisors was famously quoted as saying “never let a good crisis go to waste”. Using this rule we have seen attempts to destroy the fundamentals that have made up the university ethos, not just for decades but for hundreds of years. While we are fighting against increased workloads and reduced salary we must not forget that if academic freedom disappears it will be gone forever. If tenure is undermined it too will be gone forever. If collegial governance ceases to exist, it will never come back.

But is it realistic for a trade union to ask its members, who are suffering painful financial hardship on foot of short-term immediate measures not to prioritize the fight against them in order to concentrate on the defence of these longer term ideals? I do not think

so. That is why it is so immensely important that we have an international trade union response in defence of fundamental university values.

So what is the future for higher education in Ireland? There is a great deal of uncertainty. On the one hand it is undeniable that the staffing restrictions have been more successful than the State could ever have envisaged. There will also be, it is presumed, substantial numbers of public servants retiring before 29 February 2012 because that is the date when pension arrangements will change. There is perhaps a naive idea on the part of many academics that things are so bad that they can hardly get worse and also, that in any event, the State has already achieved substantial savings. As I say, this may be extremely naive.

On a wider scale the big issue in Ireland is the overall funding of higher education which is now and always has been (even prior to the current recession) woefully inadequate. Our Minister for Education is faced with a huge dilemma. He is under enormous pressure to reintroduce undergraduate tuition fees. This will be extremely difficult for him because it was his party which abolished these fees in the first place and has been always extremely proud of that achievement. The question is being asked – will our Minister have the courage to follow the example of a minority of OECD countries and recognise that since higher education is an investment in our future that the correct thing to do even in time of recession is to **increase** investment there? Certainly this can be justified as currently in Ireland we have historic levels of participation in higher education. The levels are at approximately 55% of the cohort currently and the national ambition is to rise to 70%. Ordinarily this would be something of which we as academic trade unions would be extraordinarily proud. However, considering the inadequate funding of the higher education system we have to ask ourselves, are these undergraduates getting the education they deserve?

In summary therefore, this is my (very subjective) take on the situation in Ireland:

The Irish people are not as angry as the Greek people because

- (a) They blame their own political class for the difficulties we are currently in;

(b) There is a tradition built up over recent decades of negotiating with the Government on major social problems. This is now reflected in the 'Croke Park' Agreement.

In addition to the above there is a perhaps naive optimism that things have got so bad that they are unlikely to get much worse and may well get better soon. Whether their optimism lasts over the course of the next few months is open very much to question.

But in the area of higher education our resources have been cut back so much and the demands being placed upon our members are so huge that it is almost as if we are holding our breath. Our lungs are about to burst. We do not know if we will be able to hold on much longer. The whole system could face a catastrophic collapse or our Government could be progressive and wise and recognise the importance of our sector to our nation's future prosperity. Anything can happen. Obviously we hope for the best.

In the meantime, international solidarity is incredibly important. We must relentlessly emphasise the importance of higher education in all economies. We must point out that the circumstance in one country is not unique, that the problems which face us face all of our colleagues. It is a cliché, but it is true, together we are stronger. I thank FenProf for organising this conference and thank you for the opportunity you have given me to share my views.

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