CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	The Downing Street Declaration and its implications for education in the Republic of Ireland
Authors	Hyland, Áine
Publication date	1994;1994
Original Citation	Hyland, Á. (1994) 'The Downing Street Declaration and its implications for education in the Republic of Ireland', TUI Congress Journal 1994.
Type of publication	Conference item
Rights	© 1994, Áine Hyland.
Download date	2026-11-17 12:29:24
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17814



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

The Downing Street Declaration and its Implications for Education in the Republic of Ireland

by *Áine Hyland,*
Chairperson,
Educate Together

[FOR THE T.U.I. CONGRESS JOURNAL, 1994]

On 15 December, 1993, An Taoiseach Albert Reynolds and the British Prime Minister John Major signed a joint declaration (The Downing Street Declaration). This declaration declared that "the dynamic for future progress must reside in the full use of the democratic political process, in the underlying changes in Irish society, north and south, and in our external environment". The Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister made a solemn commitment to promote co-operation at all levels. The declaration recognised the right of freedom and expression of religion, the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, sex or colour and stated that the future of the island depends on the nature of the relationship between the two main traditions that inhabit it. The joint declaration unambiguously stated that every effort must be made to build a new sense of trust between these communities.

The declaration was warmly welcomed by people of all traditions on the island of Ireland. It was particularly welcomed by those who have been actively involved for over twenty years in working towards peace and reconciliation and in providing opportunities for people from different religious and cultural traditions to come together and, in particular, to

have their children educated together. For such people the commitment in the declaration that the Taoiseach "will examine with his colleagues any elements in the democratic life and organisation of the Irish state ... that can be represented as not being fully consistent with a modern democratic and pluralist society and undertakes to examine any possible ways of removing such obstacles" was particularly welcomed.

Since the first multi-denominational primary school was set up in 1978, parents who wished to have their children educated together have faced a series of obstacles in setting up such schools. One might have expected that following the eruption of the troubles in Northern Ireland in 1969, Governments both north and south of the border would have been sympathetic to and supportive of initiatives coming from grassroots to improve and strengthen relationships across cultural and religious divides. Surprisingly, this was not the case initially either north or south for parents who were to the forefront of the movement to educate their children together. However, by the late 1970s and early 1980s the most intransigent of these obstacles appeared to have been overcome. The numbers of integrated schools in the north and multi-denominational schools in the south grew during the 1980s so that by end of the decade there were 10 multi-denominational schools in the Republic and somewhat more than that in Northern Ireland. Both north and south of the border the main difficulty facing parents who wished to see their children educated in such schools was the difficulty in getting access to suitable buildings in which to start such schools. By the standards of other countries in the European Union, it seems extraordinary that parents should have to provide privately owned accommodation for schools where children of all social, religious and cultural backgrounds are educated together i.e. for non-selective schools. But for historical reasons the primary school system in Ireland has evolved in such a way that

the state provides financial support for corporate bodies (usually the Churches) to set up schools; the state does not itself provide primary schools.

In Northern Ireland the integrated school movement initially focused on providing second level schools for their children on the basis that all existing second-level schools were selective either academically or religiously. In the south, the Educate Together movement decided to concentrate on setting up schools at primary level. This was the level at which there was no option for parents of different religious backgrounds who wanted to have their children educated together. At post-primary level, the vocational schools in the south have always been undenominational and democratically run and the more recent community schools and particularly community colleges also welcome pupils of all religious denominations. Although there are some areas of the country where access to undenominational schooling at post-primary level is not easy, Educate Together has continued to concentrate on the primary level and to date all Educate Together schools are primary (national) schools.

In addition to the difficulty of getting access to suitable accommodation in which to start multi-denominational schools, a major fact which has militated against the development of such schools is the practice introduced by Minister Patrick Cooney in 1986 whereby multi-denominational schools are recognised in a provisional capacity only in the early years and are ineligible for capital grants during crucial and expensive years. This has not been the case for denominational schools which are eligible for capital grants from the start. The new practice (not included in any rule book or circular but cited in letters from the Department of Education to new groups seeking to set up multi-denominational schools) is arguably in breach of the Constitution of Ireland. Its effect is that multi-denominational schools have

temporary or provisional recognition only in the early years, an unspecified period, and during this time are not eligible for any capital grants. This means that at the stage when the schools are growing most rapidly and have to spend money on refurbishing and furnishing temporary premises, no capital grants are available. These regulations have been a major deterrent for groups attempting to open a multi-denominational school but because of exceptional practical support by Mary O'Rourke T.D. during her term of office as Minister for Education, 7 such schools managed to overcome difficult obstacles and get started between 1987 and 1990. Since Mary O'Rourke left office, no multi-denominational school has managed to open, apart from Gaelscoil an Ghoirt Alainn which opened in Cork in 1993.

The Educate Together movement has appealed to successive ministers since 1986 to remove this discriminatory practice and when the Green Paper was published in Summer, 1992, there was great welcome for the statement that "where the establishment of further multi-denominational schools represents the wishes of parents, and where such schools can be justified on the basis of demand, the Department of Education will facilitate and support the establishment of such schools on the same terms as those available for the establishment of denominational schools". Members of the Educate Together movement interpreted this statement as an effective commitment to the removal of the provisional recognition requirement. During the debate on the Green Paper, Educate Together played a full and active part in the debate. Since the two major obstacles to the development of the sector are the difficulty of gaining access to suitable accommodation and provisional recognition, these were the two key issues which Educate Together concentrated on during the Green Paper debate. Just over a year ago, the new Programme for Partnership Government seemed to suggest a possible solution to the accommodation problem, in its proposal to set up

intermediate management structures for the administration of education. Educate Together recognised that such structures could provide a solution to the accommodation issue. The proposed local educational authorities might take on the type of role such authorities have in other countries of the European Union in relation to the ownership of buildings which might be used for multi-denominational schools.

Like the other partners in Irish education, Educate Together warmly welcomed the opportunity to participate in the National Education Convention in Dublin Castle in October, 1993. At the official opening the Minister stated that the Convention was designed to facilitate genuine debate and discovery. Participants were invited to contribute and listen, to clarify and analyse and arrive at the fullest possible understanding of ways forward to meet the challenges which confront Irish education. The Minister reiterated the Government's commitment to partnership as expressed in the Programme for a Partnership Government - "a partnership that will be dynamic and creative and geared totally towards confronting the major challenges that lie ahead of us". The Minister sat through all the public presentations and discussions during the Convention and committed herself "to carefully listen to the contributions of each group". It was, therefore, with great hope and expectation that Educate Together played its full part in the discussion and explained the obstacles and difficulties which it had encountered and continues to encounter in its efforts to develop.

The publication of the report of the National Education Convention in January was another most heartening event for members of Educate Together. Here we had a report which indicated that its authors had listened and had understood the difficulties facing the sector. A full section of the report dealt with "the provision of multi-denominational and

secular education". It stated that "there would seem to have been unanimous agreement among participants at the Convention that the rights of parents to multi-denominational education should be respected and facilitated. It also stated that "there was also appreciation of the problems groups face such as 'provisional recognition', the great difficulty of providing a site for a school and of raising the necessary 15% of the total cost of school buildings". The report went on to discuss the issue of unused and under-used church owned school property. It suggested that it would seem desirable for the State to initiate discussions with the religious authorities so that vacant school buildings could be made available on reasonable conditions to multi or non-denominational groups of parents and stated that "it would appear unacceptable for the State to have to buy back school buildings at current values, where the historical costs were, predominantly, originally paid for by the State". The report also recognised, as the Educate Together submission had suggested, that the establishment of intermediate education tiers could be a useful mechanism in assisting the provision of multi-denominational education.

There was every reason to believe that the problems of the multi-denominational sector might well be constructively addressed and perhaps resolved during 1994, particularly in the context of the White Paper and forthcoming legislation. It was, therefore, with a sense of profound shock that members of Educate Together read the booklet published by the Minister for Education on the 3 March, 1994 entitled National School Capital Programme. In spite of the apparent commitment in the Green Paper and the sympathy and understanding which appeared to have emerged as a result of the debate on the Green Paper and the discussions at the National Education Convention, the newly published National School Capital Programme baldly states: "Multi-denominational schools are initially accorded provisional recognition only to allow them time to establish their viability. The onus of

providing suitable accommodation during this period rests with the promoters of the schools .... The development of the schools is assessed during the first 3-4 years of operation. When the viability of the school has been established, permanent recognition is given and the question of securing or providing permanent accommodation arises".

It is difficult to believe that a Minister who has been so adamant that the new post-primary school in Dunboyne, Co. Meath should be a Community College so that it would cater for children of all religions has made it almost impossible for groups of parents to open a similar school at primary level. A community college is totally funded by the Government and requires no local contribution towards the capital costs of setting it up - although many of its pupils are outside the compulsory school age. In contrast, parents who want to set up a multi-denominational primary school get no state grant towards the initial capital costs and are now being told by the Minister that the provisional recognition period will last for "the first 3-4 years of operation". What the Minister is effectively saying is that not one penny of the £100m which will be spent on national school buildings during the life of this government will be spent on a new multi-denominational school. Is this really the policy of the first Labour Minister for Education since the foundation of the State?

Time is running out for a change in policy before the White Paper and the proposed educational legislation. There are only a few months left but these are crucial months. The issue of choice for parents who want the option of multi-denominational education for their children must be addressed. In the Downing Street Declaration, the Taoiseach stated that dialogue must be entered into with an acknowledgement that the future security and welfare of the people of the island will depend on an open, frank and balanced approach to all the problems which for too long have caused division. The declaration stated "the British and

Irish governments will seek .... to create institutions and structures which, while respecting the diversity of the people of Ireland, would enable them to work together in all areas of common interest". The government committed itself to "arrangements on ways on which agreement and trust between both traditions in Ireland can be promoted and established" and they appealed to all concerned to grasp the opportunity for a new departure. A group, Educate Together, has grasped the opportunity for a new departure. It is now up to the government to show in a practical and concrete way that it will support such a group. If it fails to remove the obstacles to the development of multi-denominational primary education then the credibility of the Downing Street Declaration will be severely undermined.