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THE CLOSURE OF CARYSFORT COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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Introduction

This article is a personal memoir of my relationship with Carysfort College of Education from my time as a student there in 1959 to the date of the closure of the College in 1988. It focuses in particular on the final two years of the College – from 1986 to 1988. As well as drawing on my memories and recollections, the paper draws on documents and papers which I retained when the College closed thirty years ago. Since I was a member of the College Board from 1982 to 1988, I have copies of Board minutes covering the final years of the College's existence. I also have a file of newspaper cuttings relating to the key events surrounding the closure. In addition, I kept my own personal notes of meetings and events which I attended, some of which are virtually a verbatim record of those meetings.



I am grateful to Sr. Mary Coyle and Sr. Angela Bugler, who gave me access to relevant files in the archives of the Sisters of Mercy in Booterstown. Unfortunately, I was unable to access papers in Archbishop's House in Drumcondra which might have been relevant to the closure, as diocesan archives later than 1972 are not accessible to the public. An article by Breandán Delap in this collection, summarises

the content of Department of Finance papers in the National Archives relating to the closure of Carysfort College. Breandán points out that the Department of Education has not deposited papers relating to the closure of Carysfort in the National Archives, in spite of the fact that it is now more than 30 years since the closure of the College.

While this paper does not purport to be an objective or unbiased account of the events leading up to the closure of the College, it is as accurate as the papers available to me at the time of writing allow. It would be naïve to suggest that my interpretation and analysis of events are the only possible ones, and no doubt some of my colleagues will have somewhat different views. However, I hope that this account will be of interest to readers and useful to social and educational historians.

My Student Days in Carysfort

I first set foot in Carysfort College in September 1959 when I enrolled as a first-year student on the two-year primary teacher training course. I had done my Leaving Certificate in the Convent of Mercy Secondary School in Ballymahon, Co. Longford – a school which held primary teaching and the ‘call to training’ in very high esteem. Although the academic standard was high in Ballymahon, almost none of its pupils went to university. Entering a convent with a view to becoming a nun; accepting a call to training for primary teaching; training in a Dublin hospital to become a nurse; or entering the civil service were the ambitions (in order of popularity) of final year pupils in Ballymahon in the 1950s.

I was a boarder in Ballymahon for six years and when I sat the Leaving Certificate in 1959, my parents and siblings lived in Ennis Co. Clare, where my father, Tomás Ó Domhnalláin, was a school inspector. I had put Mary Immaculate College in Limerick as my first choice for a primary teacher training course and as I did very well in my Leaving Cert (I came tenth in the country in my application for teacher training), I was offered a place in the college of my choice, Mary Immaculate College, having been interviewed by Sr. Loreto, the highly respected President of the College.

However, just as I was about to accept my place in Limerick, my father was transferred as an inspector from Ennis to Dublin and as an exceptional matter, the Department of Education agreed that I could be given a place in Carysfort College, Blackrock which would be geographically more convenient for me and my family. However, I would have to be a boarder in Carysfort, as all Training College students in those days had to live on campus.

From the beginning, I was unhappy in Carysfort. I found the academic atmosphere intellectually stifling, the black serge uniform uncomfortable and old-fashioned, and the extremely strict rules overwhelming. The then President of the College, Mother Teresita McCormack, ruled with a rod of iron. Although I was accustomed to boarding school life, having spent six happy years in Ballymahon, Carysfort was in a different league. Every student was known by a number – not by name. (My number was TC272). Conformity was essential. The atmosphere was cold and forbidding – a culture of fear prevailed and I rarely heard a kind word uttered either by staff or students. The exception was Sr. Leonie’s ‘Infant Classroom’ (Seomra na Naíonán) which was bright and colourful and a haven of peace and tranquillity. The College library consisted of one large room (afterwards to become the staff room) with a few tables, chairs and glass-fronted, locked cupboards containing a limited number of books covered in brown paper. On the very few occasions that we were allowed to leave the campus for a few hours, we were not allowed to use the front entrance to the College – we had to use the back gate on Avoca Avenue. The only time of the week I could go home to Terenure (where my parents and siblings now lived) was on a Sunday afternoon, but since we couldn’t leave Carysfort until after midday Mass and had to be back for Benediction at 7.00 pm, my visits home were short and limited. I was unhappy and lonely for my family, so when the opportunity came at the beginning of December 1959 to leave Carysfort for a job in the civil service I had no difficulty in making that decision.

On 2 December 1959, I went to the office of the President of the College, the formidable and remote Mother Teresita McCormack, to tell her that I had been offered a post as a Junior Executive Officer (E.O.) in the civil service. I still remember the fear and trepidation with which I entered her study – a very large room where I had to walk quietly and correctly up to her desk and wait for her to deign to lift her head from her papers. Having heard my story, she intoned in a funereal voice: ‘My child: do you realise that you are leaving an honoured profession for a mere job!’ My ‘mere job’ was in the Department of Education in Marlborough St. where I spent five happy years, and where I met my late husband Bill Hyland.¹

My next encounter with Carysfort was in 1976. John Coolahan had been lecturer in the History of Education in the College from 1971 to 1974, when he was appointed to University College Dublin. He had been a doctoral

1 A paper which I wrote about my years as a civil servant in the Department of Education was published in *Irish Educational Studies* in 2015 – ‘The Investment in Education Report 1965; Recollections and Reminiscences’ in *Irish Educational Studies*, 33:2, pp. 123–140.

student in the Education Department in Trinity College when I was a Masters student there. The subject of my M.Ed. thesis, which I had completed in 1975, was the history of primary curriculum in Ireland at the turn of the 20th century – and in 1976, when John contacted me, I was a doctoral student in Trinity College, researching the history of the administration and financing of Irish education. The new three-year B.Ed degree course had been introduced in Carysfort, and history of education was a significant part of the Foundation Studies programme. John asked me if I would undertake some tutoring work with second and third year students and so the next phase of my relationship with Carysfort began.

The Carysfort I encountered in 1976 was a very different college to the Carysfort I had left in 1959. The building had been transformed – it was now bright and cheerful with lots of hustle and bustle and student activity. The tons of statuary and holy pictures that had adorned the walls of the College in 1959 had disappeared and had been replaced by plants and flowers and by tastefully chosen works of art, many of which I recognised as high-quality pieces by Irish artists. Instead of the boarding school atmosphere of the late 1950s, this was a modern third level campus where students were treated as adults. The facilities were impressive and up-to-date and the library and resource centre were much better than those in the Education Departments of Irish universities at the time. Above all, the relationships between management and staff, and staff and students were respectful and trusting and the culture was positive and constructive. This transformation had been achieved in a very short time by the new President of the College, Sr. Regina Durkan.

Sr. Regina had been appointed President of the College following the acrimonious student strikes of 1972 and 1973 – which are described in more detail in another article in this publication. She moved quickly to remove the causes of student unrest, both in terms of the academic life of the College, and student life generally. As Chair of the College Board she presided over the introduction of the new three year B.Ed – first awarded in 1977 – and she quietly but determinedly transformed the physical infrastructure of the campus. She was a most impressive educational leader and was a role model *par excellence* for female staff and students. I admired and still admire her enormously. Thanks to her vision and astuteness, by the time the closure of Carysfort College was announced in 1986, the College could boast of having more sophisticated and modern facilities than any college of education in Ireland. Sr. Regina had also provided career opportunities for academic lay women, following the removal of the marriage bar in 1972.

From 1976 to 1979 I enjoyed my work as a part-time tutor in Carysfort College. During the same period, I was a teaching practice supervisor in the Education



The final photograph of the staff of Carysfort College, May 1986.

Department of Trinity College where I was continuing my doctoral research. I was also actively involved, in my capacity as parent, in the very demanding and contentious campaign to set up Ireland's first multi-denominational national school, the Dalkey School Project, which opened in 1978.

After a short time as a tutor in Carysfort, I realised that the sum of my various part-time posts was greater in terms of contact hours than the full-time posts of my colleagues, so I decided it was time for me to apply for a full-time post. My three children were at school by this stage and although I had not completed my doctoral studies, I knew that I was on the way to achieving a Ph.D. In 1978, I applied for a post as assistant lecturer in Carysfort but was not successful. The following year, I applied for a post as college lecturer and again I was turned down. While I received positive feedback and ongoing support from Sr. Regina, I was aware that the representatives from Archbishop's House and from UCD on the interview board (usually priests) looked askance at my involvement in the Dalkey School Project and were not impressed by my support for multi-denominational education.

In 1979, on the retirement of Sr. Gonzalez, the then Admissions Officer in the College, her post was publicly advertised. This post, which was advertised at senior lecturer level, required 50% involvement as Admissions Officer and 50% as a lecturer in an area of the Foundation Studies element of the B. Ed. programme. This was my third successive year applying for a full-time post in Carysfort, and my eclectic experience to date – as a civil servant, a teacher and a researcher – stood me in good stead this time. By this stage, the Dalkey School Project N.S. had been established and the Dublin Archdiocese was perhaps not as opposed to the reality

of multi-denominational education as it was to the principle. On 1 April 1980, I was appointed Admissions Officer in Carysfort at senior lecturer level – at a salary which was way above what I had earned to date. Having had to resign from the civil service as a result of the marriage bar in 1964, I was now finally back in a permanent pensionable post.

The years I spent as Admissions Officer in Carysfort – from 1980 to 1988 – were happy and fruitful years. Sr. Regina gave me free rein to transform and modernise the recruitment and admissions processes. Michael McKeown as head of the Education Department, was flexible and supportive, and we worked together to deliver the History of Education syllabus. From 1982 onwards, I was an ex-officio member of the College Board and I was involved in various committees and sub-committees of the College.

I completed my doctoral research and was awarded a Ph.D. by Trinity College in 1982. During my years in Carysfort, I continued to engage in research, to contribute to conferences and to publish in academic journals. In 1984, I was appointed a member of the Curriculum and Examinations (C&E) Board by Minister Gemma Hussey, who was committed to gender balance on public boards. During my period on the C&E board, I chaired the Joint Committee which reviewed the curriculum from the beginning of primary to the end of junior cycle post-primary schooling. The chair of the C&E board was Dr. Ed Walsh, President of the National Institute of Higher Education (NIHE), Limerick, and he brought a fresh dimension to my view of education and to Irish education generally. He presented an exciting vision of education and was dynamic and challenging in his approach. His educational vision was not shared by everyone, but in my view, he was the right man in the right place who would shake up the junior cycle and Leaving Certificate curricula which had seen little change in generations. During its three-year life, the C&E board published some very significant discussion and policy papers which only now, thirty years later, are finally having an influence on national curriculum at post-primary level.²

By the early 1980s, it was clear that the demographic situation in the country was changing. The numbers entering primary education were cut back by the Department of Education as the demand for primary teachers would inevitably diminish, unless the government decided to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio in national schools, which at that time was among the highest in Europe. Following

² Among these were two publications containing proposals for a new junior cycle curriculum – *Issues and Structures in Education* (1984) and *In Our Schools* (1986) – which are only now being implemented.

the papal visit to Ireland in 1979, there had been a surge in the number of births. In 1980, 74,000 babies were born, the highest number in any one year since the foundation of the state. However, the increase in the number of births was a once-off phenomenon and within a very short time it was clear that this surge was not the beginning of a growing trend. (Within ten years the annual number of births had fallen to 47,000). I was particularly aware of the national demographic and enrolment projections, as my husband Bill was senior statistician in the Department of Education at that time. From 1982 onwards, the Department of Education, which controlled the intake into colleges of education, reduced the intake and this reduction continued in subsequent years.

In 1982, the Board of Carysfort College, aware of the implications of falling birth figures, had set up a College Development Planning Committee to identify priorities for the College for the future. The following year, the College Board endorsed a series of proposals which reaffirmed the College's commitment to pre-service training, but also proposed extensive involvement in in-service provision and envisaged diversification outside of teacher education. In April 1984, the College made a detailed submission to the Minister for Education (in response to the government's *Programme for Action 1984-87*), which as well as reiterating its commitment to initial teacher education, made proposals relating to in-service courses for teachers as well as courses for third level students other than trainee teachers.³

HEA projections at that time indicated that approximately 20,000 additional third level places would be required in Ireland over the following 10 to 15 years. The government's document *Building on Reality 1985-1987* had stated that 'the extended use of existing facilities (in third-level) and other changes and adaptations will be utilised to the fullest possible extent in order to compensate for the shortfall in capital and current finances.' Carysfort College was willing to provide 1,000 of these extra third level places with the facilities then available in the College. Moreover, existing College staff could teach some new third level courses, thus ensuring that the extra places would cost the state nothing.

Among the areas suggested in the College's Development Plan in 1984 were Child Studies courses for those entering careers in child care and related services, and courses in Communications and Languages. The College also proposed to provide courses on computer and educational technology, drawing on the newly

3 Annual Report of the Carysfort College Board, 1984.

acquired technological capacity in the College.⁴ The Plan also proposed a range of in-service courses, including The Management of Learning Difficulties; Computers in Education; Expressive Arts; Religious Studies; School Administration and Management; Science in the Primary School; Múineadh na Gaeilge; and Local Studies.

In April 1984 a meeting was requested with the Dept. of Education to discuss these proposals but it was not until December 1984 that the Department acceded to this request. At the December meeting, department officials insisted that the discussion should be limited to teacher training courses – pre- and in-service. Other higher education courses were not to be raised or discussed. There was no communication from the DoE following that meeting, so in June 1985,⁵ a further comprehensive updated document was submitted by the College.

The Carysfort Board was unaware at the time that the need for three major colleges of education (Carysfort, St. Patrick's Drumcondra and Mary Immaculate College of Education) had been questioned by the Department of Finance in May 1985. That month, a memorandum had been sent to the Minister for Finance by Minister for Education, Gemma Hussey about the expansion of higher education. In the context of a request from Minister Hussey that consideration should be given to the setting up of three Regional Technical Colleges in the Dublin area (Tallaght, Blanchardstown and Dún Laoghaire), the Department of Finance pointed out that enrolments in colleges of education had fallen to such an extent that any two of the colleges could cater for the numbers then being accommodated in three colleges. The paper made reference to 'considerable over-capacity' in colleges of education and indicated that the closure of one college would make available a major third level building.

However, this information was not in the public domain at that time and nothing further was heard by the Carysfort Board from the Dept. of Education about the future role of the College until 4 February 1986, when a bombshell hit!

Announcement of the Closure of Carysfort College, 4 February 1986

On the afternoon of Tuesday 4 February, I was in the Admissions Office in Carysfort College preparing recruitment material for the coming academic year. I had

4 A major capital building programme costing almost £3 million (around €10 million in 2018 prices) had been completed in 1984 and as a result Carysfort College had state-of-the art facilities including sports, library and computer facilities.

5 Sr. Regina was on sabbatical leave from summer 1984 to summer 1985. The Acting President of Carysfort College during that period was John Nolan, Registrar.

contacted the Department of Education at around 2.00 pm that day to enquire about the numbers we would be permitted to admit to First Year the following September. (Colleges of education had no discretion about the numbers which they admitted each year – these numbers were, and still are, decided by the Department of Education.) The conversation was the normal conversation held with my counterpart in the Training College Branch of the Department of Education at that time every year – she would indicate an approximate number and I would estimate how many application forms and recruitment brochures would be needed. During the phone call there was not even the slightest suspicion that September 1986 would be significantly different to previous years.

At 3.30 pm there was a newflash on RTE radio indicating that the government had decided to close Carysfort College.⁶ Almost simultaneously, Mary O'Rourke, Fianna Fáil spokesperson on education, stood up in Dáil Éireann and asked, under the Order of Business: 'Will the Taoiseach make a statement on the Government decision to close Carysfort College of Education?' Her question was ruled out of order by an Ceann Comhairle who stated: 'It is not in order'. An hour later, Bertie Ahern, Fianna Fáil TD, stated⁷:

Today we hear talk about the closing down of Carysfort Training College. It is believed on this side that the Government decision has been taken in that regard but has not been announced. The Tánaiste and the Minister for Education were in the House and would not confirm or deny this. This famous college in the south of Dublin has provided services for many years. Is it to be closed down, like the hospitals, with no attempt at justification, no plans, no alternatives?

The cat was out of the bag. While the President and the staff of Carysfort College were blissfully unaware of the threat of closure until that moment, earlier that morning a letter had been delivered to the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. McNamara, from the Minister for Education informing him that Carysfort College was to be closed. When Mary O'Rourke raised the issue in the Dáil that afternoon, the news had not yet been received in the College from Archbishop's House.

I first heard the news on the car radio as I was turning on to Carysfort Avenue from the College. I turned the car round, and like many of my colleagues who

6 Report in *The Irish Press*, 5 February 1986.

7 Dáil Éireann Debate, Vol. 363, No. 7. 4 February 1986.

were out in schools supervising teaching practice, I drove back to the College. Within minutes, staff began to converge on the staff room and the shock was palpable. There was disbelief all round. At 4.00 pm. Sr. Regina came into the staff room and informed us that the Archbishop had received a letter that morning from the Minister telling him that Carysfort College was to be closed. I was shocked – as were my colleagues – as indeed was my husband Bill, who despite the fact that he was senior statistician in the Department of Education, had no inkling that the closure of Carysfort College was under consideration.⁸

Within an hour, an emergency meeting of the Carysfort branch of IFUT (the Irish Federation of University Teachers) was convened by the branch chairperson, Maura Ward. She confirmed the bad news and informed the meeting that in mid-afternoon she had received a phone call from IFUT headquarters retailing the text of a communiqué received by IFUT from the Minister for Education announcing the closure. The emergency meeting lasted 40 minutes and there was overwhelming support for two suggestions: (a) there should be no negotiations pending clarification of the Department's intentions, and (b) the IFUT branch would at that stage support the College authorities in the various measures they would undertake to avert closure.⁹

The following morning (5 February), a letter dated 4 Feb signed by the Minister for Education, Gemma Hussey, was delivered by hand to Sr. Regina.¹⁰ The first two sentences stated: 'You have received by now from His Grace, Most Rev. Dr. McNamara the news of the decision that your College should be closed. I can appreciate that this news must have been received by you with great regret and concern for your staff and your students.'

The letter continued:

The decision to close a major College of Education was a difficult one for government to have to take and it was all the more difficult for me as Minister for Education because I am conscious of the high standards attained in your College, of the dedication and commitment of your

8 Bill had been appointed in August 1966 as Senior Statistician in the Department of Education and as a key member of the then newly formed Development Branch of the Department. Following the closure of the Development Branch by Minister Richard Burke in 1973, Bill was rarely consulted about the implications for policy of changing demographic situations, or on other policy issues that might have arisen based on evidence produced by the Statistics section.

9 Hand-written minutes of the meeting of the Carysfort Branch of IFUT, 4 February 1986.

10 Copy of letter in possession of this author.

colleagues and your staff and most of all of the outstanding contribution which the Sisters of Mercy have made to teacher education and to Irish education generally for more than a century.

During your period as President you have had to cope with many changes in the academic structure of the College, in the composition of the student body and in the requirements of the National Schools. You have directed the College with vision during this period and inspired its graduates with the high ideals and dedication to service characteristic of your own order and of your own person. I must thank you also for your friendly co-operation and that of your staff with my Department throughout the years in question.

The letter concluded by stating:

The months that lie ahead will be difficult for you and all concerned but please God if we all approach the problems to be resolved with understanding, patience and sympathy, I have little doubt that satisfactory solutions will emerge. I wish to assure you of the utmost co-operation of the officials of my Department in the attempt to arrive at such solutions.

May I say how much I regret the necessity for this decision and convey to you my warmest appreciation and good wishes.

There was no longer any doubt about the situation. Carysfort College was to close and the government had no apparent plans for an alternative use for the institution or for its staff.

The letter of 4 February was poorly conceived – as became clear within a very short time. While the government and the Department of Education had the power and authority to withdraw grants for the initial teacher education programme provided by Carysfort, they had no authority to close the College. The building was owned by the Sisters of Mercy and the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Kevin McNamara was patron and manager of the College.¹¹ A decision to close the College could only be taken by the Archbishop as patron, and the decision to continue to use or not to use the building for educational purposes could only be taken by the Sisters of Mercy. The use of the word ‘closure’ was a surprisingly

¹¹ Dr. Kevin Mc Namara had been appointed Archbishop in November 1985. His reign was short-lived as he died in April 1987.

careless use of language by the Minister and her officials in the Department of Education.

In her diary that evening, Gemma Hussey wrote, with no mention of the 109 staff of the College who by a stroke of the pen had effectively been made redundant:¹²

Am well and truly in the wars over the Carysfort closure. Mary O'Rourke somehow got wind of the decision before I had time to make the public announcement, leapt up in the Dáil, and announced it to an apparently horrified world. Despite the delicate steps we were taking in order to break it properly to everybody concerned, the education world, led by Fianna Fáil, has now gone into a paroxysm of hysterical indignation. Mary Harney has joined in the emotional bloodbath and the Sisters of Mercy are describing me as hard-hearted, insensitive etc. Oh, the hypocrisy of it all!

The following morning, the national newspapers gave top billing to the news of the closure. In large capitals, the front-page headline in *The Irish Press* announced:¹³

College Shock Closure

There was widespread shock and disbelief last night among both staff and students at the sudden closure announcement by the Minister for Education, Mrs. Hussey, of one of the largest primary teacher training colleges in the country. The news was relayed to the 109 staff and 500 students after the college manager, the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Kevin McNamara, received a letter from the Minister yesterday morning. The Archbishop said the letter 'came as complete surprise to me.'

Sr. Regina said: 'My reaction is one of shock and disbelief that after 100 years of dedicated service to this country we should be treated in this way...'

And writing in *The Irish Times* that same morning, Christina Murphy wrote:¹⁴

The decision to close Carysfort College of Education in Dublin brought a shocked reaction last night. The Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Kevin

¹² Gemma Hussey, *At the Cutting Edge*, p. 194.

¹³ *Irish Press*, 5 February 1986.

¹⁴ *Irish Times*, 5 February 1986.

McNamara, patron and manager of the 109-year old teacher training college expressed 'dismay' at the news and said it has 'far-reaching implications'. The president of the Sisters of Mercy run establishment, Sister Regina Durkan, condemned the closure as a 'totally pointless waste of a superb third level facility' and complained angrily of the lack of consultation and the failure to give any warning.

Falling pupil numbers, a young teaching force which is giving rise to few retirements, the need to contain public expenditure and achieve 'a better reallocation of resources' were the reasons given by Mrs. Hussey for closing the college which costs £2.5 million a year to run.....The axe fell on the oldest and possibly most renowned of the colleges of education.

The morning after the shock announcement (5 February) a delegation from IFUT headquarters went to the Department of Education in Marlborough St.¹⁵ At 11.30 am they met with 'officials at Assistant-Principal and Principal Officer level who had been unable to provide any information.' At 12.45 they met with the Secretary¹⁶ and Assistant Secretary who indicated that they were prepared to discuss 'at a future point' details relating to timing and provision for staff. The President of IFUT, John Lewis, made it clear that IFUT would do everything necessary to support Carysfort staff 'including if necessary High Court action.'

The following day, more than 300 students from colleges of education around the country (including a group of 100 who had travelled from Mary Immaculate College in Limerick) marched in protest to Trinity College where Minister Hussey was scheduled to open a computer network system. However, security was tight and the students failed to get through the security barrier. In any event, the Minister did not appear at the opening in Trinity College – she was detained in the Dáil. The students then marched to the Dáil where 'a handful of Fianna Fáil TDs met them at the main entrance to hear their grievances.'¹⁷ The students then decided to occupy the offices of the Department of Education – but 'they got it slightly wrong when they went to Hawkins House and occupied the offices of the Inspector of

¹⁵ IFUT report, February 1986.

¹⁶ The Secretary of the Department at the time was Declan Brennan. He had been appointed Secretary in October 1984, having previously served in the Department of Public Service. According to the records available to me when writing this article, this meeting appears to have been one of the very few meetings he attended in relation to the closure of Carysfort College. The Assistant Secretary in Primary Branch (which had responsibility for colleges of education) was Dr. Finbarr O'Callaghan.

¹⁷ *Irish Press*, 7 February 1986.

Taxes' by mistake! Why they went to Hawkins House is a mystery – while the Department had some offices there, the Minister's office and the headquarters of the Department were and still are in Marlborough St. According to a report in *The Irish Press* the following day:¹⁸

Gardai who were called to the scene (in Hawkins House) left the building and reported that there were no students occupying the building. But they had to pay a second visit to discover that the students were there alright – but in the wrong office.

The following day, Sr. Regina led a march of Carysfort staff and students to Marlborough St where she handed in a letter of protest to Dr. Finbarr O'Callaghan, assistant secretary. I walked on that march, and I remember it was a bitterly cold day with flurries of snow blowing in our faces.

On 5 February, IFUT issued a Press Release in which it 'deplored the brutal lack of consultation in relation to (the closure of Carysfort) and the inept and insensitive manner of its announcement.' It expressed its determination to resist the closure which it said would be 'a blow to the entire education system.' It argued that the closure of Carysfort and further restricting the numbers of third-level places did not make sense 'in the context of the large body of young people seeking further education and with only the dole-queue as an alternative.'¹⁹

Even at this early stage, an issue was emerging about the terms and conditions of employment of Carysfort staff which could prove to be embarrassing for church and state if it were not resolved quickly. While there were suggestions from the Minister and her department officials that staff redundancies were on the cards, an anomaly regarding the status of the staff had arisen. Carysfort staff regarded themselves as being in the same category as teachers, whose salaries were paid by the State and who were therefore entitled to public service conditions of employment. The Department on the other hand at the time of the announcement, seemed to be of the view that Carysfort staff were private employees. Traditionally, colleges of education were funded by a grant-in-aid which was paid in a lump sum to the manager (i.e. the Archbishop) every month. This cheque was then relayed from Archbishop's House to the College and salaries were paid out of a College account under the signature of the College President. Over the years, the rate of PRSI

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ IFUT Press Release, 5 February 1986.

which was paid on behalf of staff by the College authorities was the lower rate paid by public servants, which meant that Carysfort staff would not be eligible for statutory redundancy payments or for unemployment benefits. This anomalous situation meant that the Department had to concede that Carysfort staff were public servants, who could not be forced into redundancy but would have to be offered redeployment or voluntary redundancy.

On 6 February, two days after the shock announcement, Mary O'Rourke, Fianna Fáil spokesperson for education, was granted permission to raise the closure of Carysfort in the Dáil²⁰ and was given eight minutes to discuss the issue. Minister for Education Gemma Hussey was given four minutes to reply. In the brief time available to her for the adjournment debate, Mary O'Rourke criticised the manner in which Minister Hussey chose to announce the news of the closure of Carysfort. She said:²¹

I should have thought that the 110 years of tradition which that College represented would have warranted a personal visit from her to the principal of the College, Sr. Regina Durkan, a woman of considerable intellectual attainment and ability ... A sensitive meeting would have been warranted during which the situation could have been outlined and perhaps out of that remedies could have been sought

The ham-fisted way in which the news of the closure had been released was to become an ongoing issue in the days and weeks ahead, and Minister Hussey was personally blamed by all sides for her insensitivity.²²

In the Dáil, Mary O'Rourke went on to state that 'it is an economic, educational and social folly to think of closing such a fine educational institution,' and pointed out that only two years previously, up to £3 million had been invested in capital expenditure in upgrading and improving the Carysfort campus. She suggested that 'the Minister consider permitting a component of the College to remain as a teacher training college ... and that the remainder of the College be used as a further third level institution ...'

She finished her speech by stating:

²⁰ On the Adjournment of the House.

²¹ Dáil Éireann Debate, Vol. 363 No.

²² During the Adjournment Debate, Deputy John Wilson (Fianna Fáil TD, who had been Minister for Education in the late 1970s) referred to the Minister as having 'the sensitivity of a rhinoceros.'

The Carysfort issue has touched a huge reservoir of feeling among the people. In villages and towns throughout the country one will come across men and women who have been educated at Carysfort... I ask the Minister to reverse her insensitive and clumsy decision in regard to Carysfort.

David Andrews, a local Fianna Fáil TD who lived beside the College in Blackrock, also contributed to the debate, referring to the decision as:

one of the greatest acts of vandalism in education and democracy it has been my experience to witness in my 21 years as a Member of the House,... I must protest in the strongest fashion about the closing of the college. This is not the end of the matter; it is but the beginning.

In her short reply, Minister Hussey welcomed the opportunity to clarify the situation. She drew attention to the 'serious decline in the birth rate' which, she stated 'led to the inevitable decision that we were going to have to look at the rationalisation of teacher training education as has been done in every other country where there has been a demographic phenomenon.' She finished her reply with the following assurance:

I should like to assure Sr. Regina, her staff and students that we intend to enter into the fullest possible discussions with them to decide where the future lies for all aspects of the college. We will be delighted to do so and intend to do so directly.

By the end of that week a great deal of activity had taken place. Letters of support had been received in Carysfort from its sister colleges of education – St. Patrick's Drumcondra, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Froebel College and the Church of Ireland College, as well as from numerous educational groups and individuals. IFUT had issued a statement rejecting the proposal to close the College and expressing its determination to resist the move, pointing out that:²³

If implemented, the Government's policy would mean a final retreat from improving the pupil-teacher ratio which is the worst of 29 countries in

23 IFUT statement February 1986.

Europe and inferior to that in many under-developed countries. Also, attempts to enhance the existing primary service through courses for practising teachers would be seriously hit and these courses have been particularly well advanced in Carysfort.

IFUT representatives had met with the Minister for Education and senior officials of the Department; with Fianna Fáil TDs; the Archbishop's representative; and with College management, and had established contact with other unions including the INTO and the unions representing the administrative staff. It had also consulted with Senior Counsel about the contractual rights of its Carysfort members.

At a national level, politicians of all parties had been contacted and briefed, both in their constituency clinics and in writing. A short adjournment debate had taken place in the Dáil on 6 February and a commitment had been made to have a full adjournment debate within a month. Various statements of support indicated that briefings had been effective and that a coherent Carysfort message had been promulgated.

Summing up the week, on Friday 7 February, Gemma Hussey wrote in her diary as follows:²⁴

It has been one of those weeks..... the Carysfort storm developed apace I feel, of course, that the Department has let me down severely on the Carysfort question once again, and that we could have had a longer lead-in to it – not to mention the fact that the government wouldn't listen to me when I told them the implications of doing this.²⁵

Lobbying by Staff and Students

There was to be no let-up in the lobbying by staff and students. A week after the announcement, at 8.00 pm on 10 February, two staff members, Michael Quigley and Proinsias Ní Dhorcaí, lecturers in the Geography and Irish departments and constituents of Gemma Hussey, turned up at her political clinic in Blessington, Co. Wicklow. Their note on the meeting stated:²⁶

²⁴ Gemma Hussey, *op.cit.*, p. 195.

²⁵ There is no indication in her published diaries prior to the 4 February, that Minister Hussey had engaged at any stage with the Carysfort issue. Her first reference to Carysfort in *At the Cutting Edge* was on 4 February, the date of the announcement.

²⁶ Note of meeting by Michael Quigley and Proinsias Ní Dhorcaí with Minister Gemma Hussey in her constituency clinic in Blessington, 10 February 1986, in possession of this author.

The Minister was very taken aback to encounter such representation in the wilds of West Wicklow. The Minister began by saying that she did not wish to pre-empt discussions with staff, students and management by discussing details with individuals. In general, she gave stock and predictable responses to all questions although certain impressions were conveyed through her tone and demeanour.

The main points she made in response to the delegation were:

- There is a diminishing need for teachers in the primary sector due to the falling birth-rate.
- No money was available to improve current teacher-pupil ratios.
- There is no future role for Carysfort College as a teacher training establishment and it will be phased out over the current cycle.
- Diversification plans for the College had not been considered by her department because they would cost extra money.
- In-service functions were not an option for the College as the Department of Education could not afford to release teachers to attend them.
- There is a need for discussions on an alternative use for Carysfort. While she obviously would not like to close the College and leave it idle, it was up to the Sisters of Mercy to negotiate on the future of the building.

The Minister made it clear to the two staff members that the final decision had been made, and it was now time to consider alternative plans for the College. She also indicated that she was very annoyed at the public perception of the closure announcement. She stated that she had acted correctly throughout, but ‘due to the irresponsibility of some individual within the College in informing Mary O’Rourke who wished to make political capital out of it,’ an unfortunate situation had arisen and a false impression given. She repeated that she herself was blameless in the matter.

The two members of staff were not alone in the clinic in Blessington that evening. A busload of Carysfort students (all claiming that they lived in the constituency), had also turned up at the clinic, and in groups of twos and threes they began to lobby the Minister. They questioned her ‘vigorously’ and she became quite irate and refused to answer any more questions. There were still about 40 students waiting to see the Minister when the Gardai were called and the Minister was led to her car flanked by Gardai. The note on the meeting concluded: ‘The behaviour of the students was impeccable throughout and the Sergeant congratulated them on this.’

The previous day, Phyllis Gaffney (a member of staff of Carysfort's French Department and a resident of Carysfort Avenue) and her husband Cormac Ó Cuilleanáin, visited Barry Desmond, Labour TD for Dún Laoghaire / Rathdown and Minister for Health at the time, in his constituency clinic in Blackrock Town Hall.²⁷ Their report on this visit was informative. Barry Desmond was frank and open and he revealed some facts that were hitherto unknown to Carysfort staff. He told them that 'the view had been sold to Cabinet that Department of Education officials, full of imaginative and creative proposals, had been in constant consultation with Carysfort, but that the College had been obstinate, inflexible and resistant to change.' He also (astutely) made the point that it was anticipated that there would be relatively little political fall-out in the South Dublin constituencies from the closure of Carysfort, 'as few people in those constituencies saw it as a place for their children to study.' However, he conceded that 'it will obviously cost support in rural constituencies.'

Newspaper Coverage of the Announcement of the Closure

Coverage of the Carysfort closure continued in the Sunday newspapers of the 9 February. An article in *The Sunday Press* by Séamus Mac Gabhann, Lecturer in the English Department, headed 'Why Kill Carysfort?' explained that 'the shock closure was totally inexplicable to the staff' because a detailed response to the Government's *Programme for Action in Education 1984-87* had been made by the College two years previously. In this article he spelled out in detail the proposals that had been made in the submission of June 1984 to the Department of Education.²⁸

An article in *The Sunday Tribune* the same day quoted a Labour TD as saying:²⁹ 'Thank God that's over; it's just about the worst week we've had since this government came in.' The article referred to 'the normally placid and monosyllabic Liam Cosgrave' who 'launched into a passionate attack at Fine Gael's parliamentary party meeting on the decision to close Carysfort College.' And in a further article in the same paper, headed 'How to Win Friends and Influence People,' a correspondent wrote:

While the controversy about the closure of Carysfort College continues to rage this weekend, there was no doubting the combative mood of

²⁷ Note of meeting by Phyllis Gaffney and Cormac Ó Cuilleanáin with Barry Desmond, TD at his constituency clinic in Blackrock on 10 February 1986; note in the possession of this author.

²⁸ *Sunday Press*, 9 February 1986.

²⁹ *Sunday Tribune*, 9 February 1986.

the teachers as they prepared to battle with Education Minister Gemma Hussey on a second front.

‘I just don’t know what the Minister is up to, but her behaviour is inexplicable and unbelievable’ said INTO General Secretary, Gerry Quigley. ‘The government have displayed just how insensitive they are to the people they are governing. It’s almost as if they’re making their own death-wish.’

A groundswell of opinion had grown throughout the country to put pressure on the government not to close the College but to ensure that it would continue to be available for educational purposes. On 10 February, Dublin county councillors passed a motion calling on the government to reconsider its decision to close Carysfort and to instruct the Minister to open negotiations with the College to find an alternative educational use for it.

It was becoming clear that some action would need to be taken by government in response to the growing and relentless pressure. The first indication of a softening in the government’s attitude came with the announcement that the closure of Carysfort would not happen immediately, as had initially been suggested by the Minister. Writing in *The Irish Times* on 11 February, Christina Murphy stated:³⁰

Carysfort College has been partially reprieved. It is to be phased out over two and a half years rather than closed down in the summer. No new students will be taken in *next* September. However existing students will be allowed to finish out their course in Carysfort....

13 February – A Ministerial Re-Shuffle

Two days later, a major Cabinet reshuffle was announced. Initially Gemma Hussey was informed by Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald that she was to be appointed Minister for European Affairs. Writing in her diary that evening, she wrote:³¹

I’m a bit stunned to-day. There’s a re-shuffle going on and I am to be Minister for European Affairs. ... This comes right in the middle of the

³⁰ *Irish Times*, 11 February 1986.

³¹ Gemma Hussey, *op.cit.* p. 196.

ongoing hassle and chaos over Carysfort, which has escalated to being a political disaster of amazing proportions – as I had warned.

However, Gemma Hussey was not appointed Minister for European Affairs as was originally envisaged. Barry Desmond refused to move from the Department of Health, and Gemma Hussey was appointed Minister for Social Welfare, widely regarded as a demotion for her. She was bitterly disappointed with this ministry and saw herself as a ‘victim of expediency.’³² On Thursday 18 February she wrote in her diary:³³ ‘Maybe I should have defied the government on the closing of Carysfort. Perhaps these words – “morality” and “Carysfort” will both be written on my grave.’

A new Minister – Patrick Cooney 18 February 1986 – March 1987

The new Minister for Education was Patrick Cooney – a TD in the Longford/Westmeath constituency, who was regarded as on the conservative side of the Fine Gael party and not the person to lead educational reform. However, from the point of view of the teacher unions, who had had a very bad relationship with Gemma Hussey, Cooney was a welcome new broom, and within 24 hours of his appointment there was a breakthrough in the teachers’ pay talks.³⁴

Mary O’Rourke wrote an article in *The Irish Independent* on 18 February 1986 proposing ‘a blueprint for the survival of an enhanced Carysfort College.’ It was clear from her article that she had been well-briefed by Carysfort interests. She argued that the new Carysfort should be an education centre comprising the following:³⁵

- A component of teacher training
- A comprehensive range of in-service courses for teachers at all levels
- Provision of appropriate third-level courses
- Development of a computer education resource and research centre,

She pointed out that while falling birth rates meant that there would be fewer pupils going through primary schools in the future, ‘this should not lead us to be complacent about the pupil-teacher ratio.’ She continued:

32 Antonia McManus, *Irish Education: The Ministerial Legacy, 1919–1999*, p. 254.

33 Gemma Hussey, *op.cit.* p. 202.

34 Antonia McManus, *op.cit.*, p. 256.

35 *Irish Independent*, 18 February 1986.

The fact is that we have 75,000 primary school children in classes of over 40 pupils. Carysfort should retain its teacher training element in any future decisions on its plans.

Some weeks later, on 3 March, the Sisters of Mercy issued a Press statement which was the first warning of the uncompromising stance that the Sisters of Mercy, as owners of the land and buildings of Carysfort and trustees of the College, would subsequently take in their negotiations with the Department of Education³⁶. This statement warned that

If the service in relation to primary school teachers and children is removed by the Government with the assent of the Irish public then the Sisters are forced to draw certain conclusions. In keeping with their purpose as a community they will be compelled – and in the present circumstances of closure without consultation of their primary teachers training function – are certainly entitled – to apply their Carysfort assets to other services in keeping with their proper purposes as a Congregation. These purposes do not per se, include the creation of another type of third-level college – that is the business and financial responsibility of the State.

For the Government and the Minister for Education (Mr. Patrick Cooney) to insist on ruling out discussion on the central purpose of the College – the training of primary teachers – is to persist in a unilateral decision that breaks down all the bases of good faith and trust between the Sisters of Mercy and the Department of Education in respect of Carysfort College. The creation of any kind of positive future for the College depends upon the restoration of such trust.

In this statement, the position of the Sisters was made clear. Carysfort College was a college of education, set up by the Sisters of Mercy to train primary teachers. The Sisters did not see their role as providing ‘another type’ of third level college. That would be a matter for the government – not for the Sisters. Their threat ‘to apply their Carysfort assets to other services in keeping with their proper purposes as a Congregation’ proved in the longer term not to be an idle threat. However, at this early stage when the shock of the closure announcement was still fresh, the full

³⁶ Press Statement dated 3 March from the Sisters of Mercy, in the possession of this author.

implications of the Sisters' statement were not appreciated, least of all by the staff of the College, who were now engaged in planning a new future for Carysfort.

Dáil Éireann – Private Members Debate 4 and 5 March 1986.

As had been promised in the immediate aftermath of the closure announcement in February, time was set aside on 4 and 5 March under Private Members' Business in the Dáil, for a full debate on the proposed closure of Carysfort³⁷. Mary O'Rourke, Fianna Fáil education spokesperson moved a motion:

That Dáil Éireann condemns the arbitrary and precipitate decision of the Government to close down Carysfort College and requests that immediate action be taken to ensure that this great and valuable institution be retained as an integral part of our higher educational system, with a specific role in teacher education.

She stated that 'like many others it is my belief that it would be economic, social and educational folly to close the college.' She emphasised that Fianna Fáil felt that Carysfort must be retained as a dynamic enhanced centre for education.

A significant number of TDs from all the main parties contributed to the Adjournment debate which lasted more than eight hours. Many of the contributions were in Irish and it was clear that all the speakers, especially those on the Opposition benches, had been very well briefed.

On behalf of the government, Enda Kenny, Minister of State for Education, moved an amendment:

That Dáil Éireann notes the action of the Government in rationalising the facilities for the training of Primary teachers and in seeking, through discussions with the interested parties an alternative role in higher education for the Carysfort College, having regard to its structure and traditions, the expertise of its staff and the developmental requirements of education generally.

He pointed out that there had been a reduction of the (teacher training) student

³⁷ Dáil Éireann Debate. *Private Members' Business*, 4 and 5 March 1986 (all subsequent quotations are taken from this debate).

population from a high of some 2,600 at the peak period some ten years ago to a little over 1,800 at present and stated that ‘it is abundantly clear that the intake to the colleges of education will have to continue to be at a very restricted level for some years to come.’ He added:

It is in this context that the resources hitherto available to the Carysfort College must be reallocated and the role of the college itself redefined, subject to agreement with the management and the owners of the college.

This was a different and much more conciliatory message than the abrupt closure notice that had been served on the College by the government on 4 February. The speeches that followed, from both sides of the House, were remarkably similar – with only small differences of detail in relation to what was meant by ‘an element of teacher training.’

Liam Cosgrave (Fine Gael TD for Dún Laoghaire/Rathdown) said:

We must look critically at Carysfort which is a college that has tremendous potential. The resources provided as recently as 1982, the library, an auditorium, a sports centre, an audio-visual centre and lecture theatres should be used for educational purposes for the people coming onstream in the future ... I attended the open day briefly last week and it demonstrated the very good facilities which should be utilised

David Andrews (Fianna Fáil TD for the same constituency) added: ‘If we are serious when we describe our young people as a great national asset, surely the case must now be to reinforce, not to dismiss Carysfort College ...’. He quoted the government’s *Building on Reality* report, which had stated that: ‘the updating and widening of teachers’ skills throughout their careers is seen as a most important element in providing a modern and flexible education programme and in improving the quality of education generally.’ He also pointed out that on the capital side, Carysfort College was reportedly valued at £20 million and reminded his colleagues that on both the pay and capital side there would be a net loss to the State if Carysfort was closed.

Others who contributed to the debate included Liam Fitzgerald (Fine Gael), Máire Geoghegan-Quinn (Fianna Fáil), Monica Barnes (Fine Gael) and P. Flynn (Fianna Fáil). Liam Fitzgerald, deploring the proposed closure asked: ‘Will there or will there not be teacher training at Carysfort College in the future?’ Máire

Geoghegan-Quinn, a former student of Carysfort, praised the 'calm, unemotional way in which Sr. Regina had dealt with the news of the closure' and pointed out that 'the type of courtesy Carysfort warrants at present is that of open and constructive consultation about its future in respect of the central purpose for which the college was founded, that is teacher training.'

Monica Barnes welcomed the fact that Minister Cooney had indicated that he was open to 'considering all kinds of new concepts' and stated that 'the debate on all sides should concentrate on the potential of Carysfort and what it has to offer.' Speaking in Irish, P. Flynn emphasised and praised Carysfort's support for the Irish language over the years. Stating that over the past three years 'no single decision had generated so much heat and resentment from the people,' he made the point that

Recession is not the time to skimp on education and teacher training. We should be building on our assets as an investment for the future and planning to improve our pupil-teacher ratio. We should give lessons in hope, not despair, to our people.

At the conclusion of the debate, the Minister for Education, Patrick Cooney summed up as follows:

... the constructive contribution from my constituency colleague made it very clear that on this issue there is a common ca(u)se between both sides of the House....

I have no doubt that between the three components (state, management and staff) ... interested in and responsible for the future of Carysfort We can devise uses for Carysfort in future that will fulfil and recognise the vocational aspirations of the Sisters of Mercy, that can give satisfaction to the professional staff and that can produce immense benefits for the educational system.

He defended the way in which his colleague Gemma Hussey, had made the announcement of the closure on 4 February, stating:

.... the use of the word precipitate, with the passage of time and the benefit of hindsight, will also be seen as an inaccurate word...Another unfortunate aspect which will be cured in time is the way in which the controversy focused in a very personal way on my predecessor. The

impression went abroad that she was a person somehow less than caring and lacking in consideration ... It is unfortunate that a politician should be castigated in a personal way for carrying out a collective decision ...

The Fianna Fáil motion was defeated by 72 votes to 65, and the Government amendment was carried by 72 votes to 63.

In her diary that evening (6 March) Gemma Hussey wrote³⁸:

The closing of Carysfort is still a cause celebre. There are lots of talks about appointing special bodies to find out other uses for it and Fianna Fáil are still condemning the closure and making promises behind their hands about keeping it on with teacher training.

Proposals for a New Carysfort College of Education

During the next few months, a number of parallel initiatives were put in place to explore and consider whether, and if so what, new future would be possible for Carysfort College. The College Board set up a *Future Planning Group*; IFUT engaged in ongoing negotiations in relation to the future of their members; the Minister for Education, Patrick Cooney (eventually) set up a *Ministerial Working Group (MWG)*; the Sisters of Mercy engaged in discussions as to the future of the College, and the Archbishop made it clear that 'he viewed his role as that of Manager of a Catholic Teacher Training College. If this ceases to be the main purpose of the College he would no longer have a role. While he would wish the College well, he would not consider it his function to negotiate for a new type of College.'³⁹

Although Minister Cooney had indicated during the Adjournment debate in the Dáil on 5 and 6 March that discussions would take place with the College authorities in relation to the future of Carysfort, he was slow to take action on the matter. During his talk at the annual conference of the Association of Primary Teaching Sisters at Easter, he mentioned 'a new role for Carysfort which would represent a challenge for all concerned.' As the College received no communication from the Minister by mid-April, Sr. Regina phoned his office and she was assured that 'he would read the file over the weekend' and would be in touch with her the

³⁸ Gemma Hussey, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

³⁹ Minutes of the Carysfort College Board, 7 May 1986.

following week. She phoned him again on 24 April, and on 28 April she followed up with a letter in which she stressed the urgency of the situation and her wish to have something to report to the Board meeting on 30 April. The Minister's reply on 29 April was testy and he was clearly irritated. His letter stated:⁴⁰

I wish to state at the outset that I totally reject any suggestion that my Department ignored any reasonable plan for the development of new courses and a more flexible use of resources at your College. I furthermore reject your suggestion that the proposed closure of the College was conveyed by summary announcement.... (the problems) are of such a nature that their resolution is more likely to be hindered than helped by correspondence of the type to which this letter is a reply or by the type of campaign already undertaken by you, the scarcely veiled threat of a resumption of which, is contained in your letter.

... I see no merit in doing business through the media. I do not intend to follow your example in that regard. I intend to proceed with an appropriate planning mechanism in relation to a future role in third level education for Carysfort in a considered and measured way ...

In the meantime, the Department of Education had sought applications via a newspaper advertisement for the B.Ed course the following year, and Carysfort College had been excluded from the list of colleges to which students could apply. On 17 April Sr. Regina wrote to all second level schools expressing regret that Carysfort College would be unable to accept applications for the following year's B.Ed course, but stating that 'if the government modifies this decision, we will be very happy to continue to provide the B.Ed. course and to accept First Year students in the coming autumn.'⁴¹

Setting up of the Ministerial Working Group (MWG)

Sr. Regina's pressure on the Minister had got the ball rolling. On 30 April, the Minister sent a letter to the Archbishop of Dublin (copied to Sr. Regina) informing him that he (the Minister) had set up a working group⁴²

40 Quoted in the minutes of the College Board, 30 April 1986.

41 Letter sent by Sr. Regina to all secondary schools, 17 April 1986.

42 Copy of letter attached to minutes of the college Board, April 1986.

which will consult with and receive submissions from interested parties and will, in the light of such consultation, make firm proposals to me and to the Government regarding the future role of the College as a third level institution, its governance, structure and support from the State.

The working group (subsequently known as the Ministerial Working Group – MWG) was to be chaired by Liam Ó Laidhin, Chairman of the HEA. It would consist of another representative of the HEA (John Hayden), a representative nominated by the President of University College Dublin, (Professor Donal McCartney); a representative nominated by the Minister for Finance, (Jim McCaffrey); Mr. Con Power, Director of Economic Policy, Confederation of Irish Industry; Mr. P. Ó Maoldomhnaigh and Dr. Finbarr Ó Ceallacháin, assistant secretaries in the Department of Education; and three senior members of the inspectorate, Mr. S. Mac Giolla Eoin, Mr. D. Mac Suibhne and Mr. B. Ó Cróinín. Mr Seán Ó Nualláin, assistant principal officer in the Department was to be the secretary to the working group.

My heart sank when I saw that the chairman of the group was to be Liam Ó Laidhin. I was acquainted with Mr. Ó Laidhin from my days in the Department of Education – he was principal officer in the Department’s Secondary Branch in the late 50s when I was an executive officer in the Buildings Branch. He was subsequently promoted to assistant secretary and Secretary of the Department of Education, and in 1984 he was appointed Chairman of the Higher Education Authority. I knew him to be cautious and conservative – ‘a safe pair of hands’ – not a man who would be interested in innovative or creative ideas for a new Carysfort. In 1983, as Secretary of the Department, when speaking at a conference on EEC Transition Projects, he questioned the need for curriculum change at post-primary level, expressing the view that the classical curriculum that had served the young Eamon de Valera well, remained appropriate.⁴³ A few years later, speaking at a seminar organised by the Curriculum and Examinations Board in Carysfort College, he reiterated those views, telling his audience that he himself was an example of the success of the secondary school curriculum – he had studied hard and done well, and the opportunity to succeed was similarly available to every young studious boy or girl. In his view, there was no need to reform the secondary school curriculum⁴⁴.

43 Jim Gleeson ‘The Curriculum Response to Free Education’ in Judith Halford (ed.) *Education for All? The Legacy of Free Post-primary education in Ireland* (Oxford et al: Peter Lang, 2018) p. 183.

44 I was present at that seminar and as a member of the Curriculum and Examinations Board, I was very frustrated at the conservative views expressed by L Ó Laidhin about curriculum reform.

The letter from the Minister setting up the Ministerial Working Group reiterated the decision that Carysfort College would be closed ‘as a training college for National Teachers’ so the omens were not good for a solution that would satisfy the various stakeholders i.e. the Minister for Education; the Archbishop of Dublin as Manager; the Sisters of Mercy as Trustees and the President, staff and students of Carysfort College.

Future Planning Group of the Carysfort College Board

Back in Carysfort, *The Future Planning Group of the College Board* consulted widely with the academic staff and presented reports to the Board on a monthly basis from March to June 1986. This author was the chair of that group and has retained the copious papers and documents which the group created and consulted during its existence. Its task was to make suggestions regarding a possible future role for the College within the Irish educational system, taking account of (a) the traditions and ethos of the College (b) the facilities and resources of the College itself and (c) bearing in mind the future needs of the country.

At an early stage of its deliberations, the group indicated that planning might best be seen as processing along four interrelated paths (as had been agreed by the College board in 1984):

1. An element of pre-service education
2. In-service education
3. Non-degree courses
4. Degree courses (other than the B.Ed).

Meetings with the Ministerial Working Group, June and July 1986

A preliminary meeting was held with the MWG on 12 June 1986. At the outset, the meeting was described by the Chairman, Liam Ó Laidhin, as ‘an exploratory meeting.’ The Carysfort delegation hoped that as a result of this meeting, they would have some idea of the kind of proposals that might find favour with the MWG. The meeting was cordial and the members of the MWG appeared willing to consider any reasonable options put forward by the Carysfort side.

While some options were floated and tentatively discussed, the MWG cautioned against any proposals that might require additional resources. Dick Sweeney, inspector with the Department’s Planning Unit, warned against any suggestions

that might require any significant building adaptations. My notes of the meeting quote him as saying: 'In our experience, it is very difficult to adapt old buildings.' Jim Caffrey, Department of Finance, warned against suggesting courses that were focused on computer skills. He stated: 'We are not short of graduates with computer skills.....we are turning out enough graduates with technological expertise.' When asked to indicate what proposals might find favour with the MWG, the chairman Liam Ó Laidhin, replied: 'A lot might depend on what courses UCD would decide to put in Carysfort.' Ominously, he repeated this twice during the meeting – and the implications were not lost on the Carysfort delegation – in my contemporaneous notes of the meeting, I underlined and highlighted that comment.

By the end of June, the Carysfort College Board had approved the proposals of the Future Planning Group, proposals which in retrospect, were far-seeing and innovative. The proposals were based on the assumption, that given the economic climate, the government was unlikely to make any significant new resources available. Consequently, the proposals would build on the resources and staff expertise already available in the College.

In summary, the new Carysfort would

- provide well-trained and highly motivated teachers (specially trained to work with the more deprived and less academically able children in our primary and post-primary schools)
- Offer a wide range of in-service courses
- Engage in educational research
- Support curriculum development and implementation
- Offer new courses in youth, family and community services
- Offer a new degree course in the Humanities area
- Offer a wide range of adult education courses.

The design of the proposed new degree course in Humanities was particularly innovative. The course would be devised on a modular basis, and would aim to meet the requirements of the employment market while at the same time offering students a sound intellectual foundation in a particular field of study. All students would take a common core which would be devoted to developing generic skills in areas such as Communications, Computers, Information, Research, Analysis and Synthesis, Quantitative and basic administrative skills.

The new degree would have the following attributes:

- It would seek to provide each graduate with specific marketable skills as well as a solid foundation in his or her chosen field of study

- It would be designed to meet identified national needs in such areas as computing, modern languages, European studies, etc.
- It would be modular in structure, in order to maximise flexibility and to make the fullest use of the intellectual and material resources of a small college
- It would include courses of an interdisciplinary character and would cater for the adventurous student who sought to make connections between different areas of study.

At least two different degree models could be offered. The first model would be an integrated degree programme in either European Studies; Irish Studies; Creative Arts and Communication and Media Studies. The second model would be a more traditional two-subject degree model, with quite a wide range of possible subjects.

On 3 July the College Board submitted its proposals to the MWG and this was followed by a meeting in the offices of the HEA on 21 July. At that meeting, I made a presentation to the MWG highlighting how the proposals responded to government policy as set out in two policy documents – *Building on Reality and the Programme for Action in Education*.

Even as I presented our proposals, I could sense the lack of enthusiasm among the members of the MWG. The chairman appeared particularly bored and uninterested. In summary, he categorised the suggestions made by the Carysfort delegation as either ‘duplicating courses that were provided elsewhere,’ or not having been ‘tried and tested’ and therefore being risky and not likely to meet with government approval. He effectively dismissed proposals for any new degree courses and he ruled out both pre-service and in-service courses. I remember vividly the disdain and the dismissive attitude he demonstrated at that meeting. In Sr. Regina’s words, ‘the MWG threw cold water on most of the new courses outlined in our submission.’ She added: ‘It was clear what they did not favour, but not at all clear what they might be disposed to support.’⁴⁵ In a hand-written note attached to the notes of the meeting, Sr. Regina summed up the meeting as follows:

The meeting was difficult to assess as to its real import. One had a sense of wariness or strategy of some sort on the part of the MWG Chairman. – a sense that the solution is not as simple as they might have been suggesting at our last meeting with them ...

45 Notes of the meeting of the Carysfort delegation with the MWG, appended to the minutes of the College Board meeting, Sep. 1986.

A meeting earlier that month (8 July) with senior representatives in UCD had been even more unsatisfactory. That meeting, which was held in the UCD President's office in Belfield, was attended by the recently appointed⁴⁶ UCD President, Dr. Patrick Masterson; Professor of Metaphysics, Rev. Desmond Connell⁴⁷; Professor of English, Gus Martin; the Registrar, John Kelly; Professor of Irish, Breandán Ó Buachalla; Professor of Modern History, Donal McCartney and Professor of Education, Des Swan⁴⁸. On the Carysfort side were Sr. Regina, John Nolan, Michael McKeown, Kevin McDonagh, Jim Walsh and myself. Sr. Regina subsequently wrote: 'UCD was not encouraging with regard to our new Arts – Humanities degree,' adding that 'UCD stressed Carysfort's excellent track record in Education – Teacher Training – and mentioned the notion of an Institute of Education which might incorporate the UCD Higher Diploma course... UCD stressed the tentativeness of this idea ...'

My notes of the meeting indicated that the UCD delegation was strongly opposed to any suggestion that Carysfort might offer any degree course other than the B.Ed. for primary teachers. Professors Mc Cartney, Ó Buachalla and Connell questioned whether staff in a teacher training college would be capable of teaching to degree level in a university. They conceded that Carysfort might possibly be recognised as a two-year 'Junior College' whose graduates might be exempt from first year in UCD. This in spite of the fact that a significant number of Carysfort staff, especially in the academic departments and including myself, had Ph.Ds, and that the B.Ed. degree course, in which students studied an academic subject to degree level, was accredited by UCD. A suggestion made by President Masterson to Professor Swan that the Education Department might consider relocating to Carysfort was greeted with shock and a distinct lack of enthusiasm by Professor Swan 'who had not consulted his staff about such a possibility.'

I found the attitude of the UCD delegation patronising and misogynistic. When the meeting ended and the door was held open to allow the two women (myself and Sr. Regina) to leave the room first, I overheard the President suggesting to the male members of the Carysfort delegation that they (the gentlemen) might like to stay back and have an informal chat without myself and Sr. Regina present. I came away from that meeting feeling angry and pessimistic. It was clear that UCD would

⁴⁶ Professor Patrick Masterson had been elected President of UCD at the end of 1985.

⁴⁷ Professor Desmond Connell was subsequently appointed Archbishop of Dublin in Jan. 1988 – a position he held until April 2004. He died at the age of 90 in 2017.

⁴⁸ It is interesting to note that neither the MWG nor the UCD delegation included a woman. Sr. Regina and I were the only two women present at any of the meetings.

not support or validate any degree course other than the existing B.Ed. It was also clear that while the President might consider moving the Education Department to the Carysfort campus, Professor Swan and his staff in UCD would oppose such a move. The attitude of the other UCD professors was very disappointing, to say the least. They would undoubtedly block any attempts by Carysfort to introduce an Arts or a Humanities degree and would refuse to validate it. It was hard to know where Carysfort could turn to now.

A further meeting was held between Carysfort and UCD on 27 August. The Carysfort side raised the issue of an Institute of Education – which had been floated by President Masterson at the earlier meeting. Sr. Regina raised the possibility of a four-year concurrent teacher training programme for post-primary teachers. There seemed to be some support for this and for the concept of a joint or collaborative Institute of Education. It was agreed, at UCD's request, to set up a joint working party with three members from Carysfort and three from UCD to further explore the concept of an Institute of Education.

On 5 September, the first (and what proved to be the only!) meeting of the joint UCD/Carysfort Working Party took place in UCD. The UCD members of this group were John Kelly (Registrar), Don McQuillan (Dean of Arts) and Des Swan, Professor of Education. The Carysfort side was represented by Sr. Regina, Michael McKeown and Jim Walsh. The main issue discussed was the concept of an Institute of Education. Such an Institute would provide initial teacher education for both primary and post-primary teachers, which would include a four-year concurrent post-primary teacher education programme. It would also provide a range of in-service courses as well as undertake educational research and accommodate the Curriculum and Examinations Board. Since UCD's attitude to such an institute would be crucial, it was agreed that UCD 'should consider these issues more closely at relevant UCD levels' and bring their response to the next meeting of the group to be held at the end of September. However, as I had predicted after the first meeting in July, the discussions of the joint working party came to nought and within a few weeks, UCD decided not to collaborate with the Carysfort side in a joint submission to the MWG. At the College Board meeting of 30 September, Sr. Regina reported that 'whereas UCD had spoken originally of a joint UCD/Carysfort submission to the MWG, (that) this was not now envisaged by UCD.'

This was an opportunity lost by UCD. At that point (September 1986) if UCD had agreed to move their Education Department to UCD and become part of an Institute of Education as envisaged by the Carysfort side, it is very likely that the Carysfort campus would have been made available to UCD and the State

by the Sisters of Mercy free of charge. However, UCD lacked the vision at that point to see the potential of such a development, and a crucial opportunity for an innovative and much-needed teacher education initiative was lost.

Submission by the Sisters of Mercy to the MWG – 30 September 1986

Meanwhile the Sisters of Mercy, as owners of the Carysfort campus and trustees of the College sent their ‘Observations on the Future of Carysfort College’ to the MWG on 30 September 1986. This was a two-page document which, while reiterating that any new role for Carysfort must include the training of primary teachers, indicated an openness to new uses for the College, but under stated conditions in relation to governance. The Sisters pointed out that Carysfort was not just a College of Education:

Carysfort includes our home, the headquarters of our Congregation, the location of the Generalate and Central Administration of our 400 Sisters, the co-ordinating centre for such diverse works as 17 primary schools (including four special schools) 10 second level schools, six large hospitals (including the Mater hospitals in Dublin and Nairobi) old peoples’ homes, child-care homes, night shelter, hostels, parish services and a variety of other activities such as Clinics, food centres etc. for the underprivileged in Dublin and Kenya. Carysfort is also the location of the Dublin Mercy Novitiate. It houses a local community of 40+ Sisters, some of them now elderly and disabled, and it has a primary school and a Religious Formation Institute in its grounds.

The document went on to state:

Carysfort is therefore at the centre of a network of services, charitable, educational, religious, social and personal, of which the College is only one part. Any realistic planning for the future of the College must take strict account of this complexity. Carysfort College is not an unattached, free-standing, third level college or campus, and it cannot be suddenly converted into such.

Having reiterated the commitment of the Sisters of Mercy to the preparation of

primary teachers, especially 'the challenge of providing good teachers and adequate educational services, especially for the more-deprived and less-scholastically motivated of our young people' the submission continued:

It is the view of the Sisters of Mercy that a college like Carysfort could very fruitfully be funded to take up the challenge of research and development with regard to new forms of teacher-education, pilot-projects in parent-education, infant and pre-school provision, and investigation of the motivational challenges presented by the many under fifteens who in one way or another effectively drop out of the present school system. Carysfort could also be developed as a centre for the initial and in-service training of teachers for children with special educational needs and disabilities and learning difficulties.

The submission concluded by reiterating the Sisters' 'continuing dedication to the educational interests of the Irish people,' and with a promise to 'examine as openly as possible any positive proposals which the Working Group may wish to offer in writing for their consideration.'

Further Submissions by the Board of Carysfort College to the MWG

It was now clear that UCD would not collaborate in a joint submission to the MWG, nor would they consider being part of an Institute of Education on the Carysfort campus. The Sisters of Mercy were adamant that Carysfort would not be a 'free-standing third-level college or campus' without a teacher education focus. The Board of Carysfort College had to reconsider their options, and at the October Board meeting, it was agreed to prepare a new submission, bearing in mind the refusal of the MWG in July to consider the proposals of the Carysfort College Board prepared before that meeting. Again, in October, the staff of the College came up with innovative and creative proposals, but this time they were within the parameters set out by the Sisters of Mercy, and insofar as it was possible to get an indication of what might be acceptable to the MWG, within their parameters also. I have a file of suggestions and proposals made by individual members of the College Board, any one of which would be deemed progressive by today's standards.

On 15 October, Sr. Regina sent a detailed proposal to the MWG on behalf of the College Board. Under this new proposal the College would be renamed an

Institute of Education and would work 'in close co-operation with a larger college or university and would be funded directly by the HEA.' It would operate as a major Education Centre for curriculum development, teacher support and in-service education, with scope to develop a diverse and innovative range of facilities for research and continuing education

Meeting with the MWG 10 November 1986:

A Carysfort delegation met with the MWG on 10 November to present the revised submission. The meeting started well. Sr. Regina pointed out that the proposals she was presenting had been drawn up taking account of the wishes of the Sisters of Mercy as well as those of the MWG as indicated at the July meeting, including the chairman's suggestion that the idea of an Institute of Education be further explored. The revised proposals had arisen from various discussions 'and from our own more sustained examination of the complexity of the issues involved – especially the constraints and possibilities of the Carysfort campus as outlined in the submission of the Trustees.'

Sr. Regina indicated that the new Carysfort Institute of Education could offer (a) new four-year concurrent secondary teaching programmes, building on Carysfort's academic and education staff. Students could graduate at the end of Year 3 with a B.A or continue to fourth year and get a B.Ed. (b) A new Bachelors programme in Arts/ Humanities and/or Youth and Community Work, and (c) In-service education. She explained that since UCD had been opposed to Carysfort providing an Arts/Humanities degree, she had spoken to the Provost of Trinity College about the possibility of Trinity providing validation for such a degree. She also said that Dublin VEC had indicated an interest in locating some of its courses (e.g. its Music School) on the Carysfort campus.

Although the meeting had started on a positive note, it quickly became fraught. Professor Donal McCartney (while making the point that he was not representing UCD) was unsympathetic to the proposals. When the chairman, Liam Ó Laidhin, asked why the Institute of Education idea had not been pursued with UCD, Sr. Regina diplomatically replied: 'We got the impression that the Education Dept. in UCD felt very vulnerable.' Michael McKeown added: 'UCD was alive with ideas as to how they might use our facilities ... UCD are the spectres hanging over all the talks.'

Having heard the revised proposals, the chairman again poured cold water over everything. He dismissed suggestions that new and different types of teacher

education programmes might be considered, saying: 'You either impinge on the other primary teacher training colleges or you impinge on the H.Dip.' While opposing any innovative suggestions, he reiterated a point he had made at the meeting in July: 'Everything you suggest is catered for already...' He concluded by saying: 'I don't think there is a place for Carysfort as an independent operating college You could become involved in UCD ... the staff could be taken over by UCD and the premises could be used by UCD ...'

It appeared as if the MWG had already made up its mind not to support any proposals from the Carysfort side that would see the College continue as an independent or separate college retaining its existing staff. The Carysfort delegation realised this as soon as the chairman gave his response to the proposal, and Michael McKeown retorted angrily:

We read (the Dáil debate on 6 March) as an indication that the government saw a future for Carysfort College as a separate college... You see your role as picking up the pieces and disposing of them as bloodlessly as possible – we saw our role as constructing a new future for Carysfort College ... Are we totally at odds in our perception of your role?

Liam Ó Laidhin replied: 'I think we are. (What we are trying to do is) to preserve the future of people going on pensions ... giving people alternatives ... (giving) the staff almost the same jobs somewhere else.' He added that the residential accommodation on the Carysfort campus could be made available for UCD. At that stage both Michael McKeown and I reminded him that the Carysfort buildings were not publicly owned. I said that I found it quite astonishing that the role of the Trustees was being brushed aside so peremptorily. Micheal Mc Keown accused Liam Ó Laidhin of 'talking as if the building is publicly owned.'

The frustration of the Carysfort delegation was obvious at this stage. Michael Mc Keown indicated that as a member of IFUT he felt he had little or no choice but to recommend to his Carysfort colleagues that they should no longer co-operate with the MWG. Liam Ó Laidhin responded: 'We will talk to IFUT – we need to know what kind of redundancy terms are acceptable to IFUT.' Michael McKeown concluded his input by saying: 'The ground rules have fundamentally altered today At an individual level I cannot see that there is any further contribution I can make at this stage.'

As she closed the meeting, Sr. Regina warned that if the MWG 'decided to dispense with staff, there will be very little in it for the Trustees.' She could see that

the only solution might be ‘the unfortunate road of litigation,’ and added that the MWG owed it to the country ‘to seek a solution that is not a piece of window dressing.’ She concluded the meeting by saying ‘I’d rather UCD would buy the place.’

The meeting of 10 November was the beginning of the end as far as the staff of the College was concerned. There was no longer any doubt about the intentions of the MWG. They would not agree to a new role for Carysfort College under which it would remain an independent college and so ensure the continuing employment of existing staff. Redeployment, early retirement and voluntary redundancies would be the only solution that the MWG would consider. Issues relating to the use of the building would be a matter for the Sisters of Mercy, but given the offhand manner in which the Sisters had been treated by the Ministers and the Department of Education, the Sisters were unlikely to go along willingly with the MWG’s proposals. I anticipated even then, that the Sisters of Mercy were unlikely to be an easy target for Liam Ó Laidhin and the MWG – the Carysfort campus belonged to the Sisters – the Minister had no lien on the title as no legal agreements had been signed in relation to any of the building grants or loans that the Sisters had received from the Department over the decades since it had moved to the Carysfort site in 1903.

While further suggestions continued to be made to the MWG after the meeting of 10 November, it was clear that the writing was on the wall for the staff and for the future of Carysfort as an independent entity. Some further meetings were held by various stakeholders throughout the winter of 1986/7 but few of us really believed that anything constructive would come from these meetings.

Meeting between the MWG and the Sisters of Mercy 12 February 1987

The first and only meeting between the MWG and the Sisters of Mercy was held on 12 February 1987 – more than a year after the announcement of the closure of the College had been made by Minister Hussey.⁴⁹ In retrospect, it was extraordinary that the MWG left it so late to engage in a face-to-face meeting with the Sisters. The meeting was attended by no fewer than a team of eight on the Sisters of Mercy side (including Sr. Regina), and by almost all members of the MWG.⁵⁰ The

⁴⁹ Minutes of the meeting of the College Board, February 1987.

⁵⁰ Notes of meeting held on 12 February 1987, between the Trustees of Carysfort College and the MWG, appended to the minutes of Carysfort College Board, Feb. 1987.

Sisters started the meeting by insisting that the MWG's terms of reference required them to seek a future for the College as a third level institution, with its existing staff, resources and facilities, and not merely as premises. The tone of the meeting was similar to the tone of the earlier meetings attended by the College Board representatives. The view of the MWG was that 'The country could not afford any new ideas at this time – what was needed was job creation and cutting back on expenditure in all areas.' With regard to the proposals put forward by the Sisters in their submission, Jim McCaffrey stated that the MWG could not entertain 'such nebulous ideas.'

It was clear that the MWG had already come to a conclusion – and this conclusion was made public within a few weeks.

A Change of Government –

On 22 January 1987, the Labour Party pulled out of the Coalition government. A general election was inevitable and was held on 18 February 1987. Fianna Fáil won 81 seats and Fine Gael lost heavily, gaining only 51 seats, with the Progressive Democrats (PDs) winning 14 seats. A coalition government of Fianna Fáil and PDs was formed and Mary O'Rourke was appointed Minister for Education on 11 March 1987.

A week before the new Minister took up office the MWG produced and published its long-awaited report.

Report of the MWG – 3 March 1987

At 10.45 am on the morning of Monday 2 March 1987, Sr. Regina received a phone call to say that the office of the Minister for Education had just rung the Superior General's office to ask if Sr. Sebastian could meet the Minister at 12.00 noon. As Sr. Sebastian was away from Carysfort, Sr. Regina agreed to meet the Minister on her behalf. The Minister, Patrick Cooney and the Secretary of the Department, Declan Brennan, arrived in Carysfort at 11.55 am. They brought with them and gave to Sr. Regina (for Sr. Sebastian) three copies of the proposals from the Working Group, which they said were to be released to the press later that day.⁵¹

⁵¹ Minutes of the College Board, March 1987.

The *Proposals from the MWG on the Future Role for Carysfort College* were dated 3 March 1987. The bland and disappointing three-page document read as follows:

1. The partnership between the Minister for Education and the Congregation of Sisters of Mercy for the use of the College premises should be continued.
 2. The Superior General should be recognised as Manager of the College.
 3. The college premises to be made available for such educational purposes as the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy in agreement with the Minister would approve.
 4. The fact that Carysfort College is a Recognised College of the NUI and has a particular relationship with UCD suggests a close involvement of Carysfort College in its new role with UCD.
 5. The type of educational courses and purposes for which the College premises might be made available might include:
 - (a) UCD courses:
 - i. The training of teachers for post-primary schools e.g. the transfer of the H.Dip. in Ed course to the Carysfort College premises; the responsibility for the courses would remain with UCD but there could be a significant input from Carysfort College through consultation with the Carysfort College authorities and the involvement of some members of the staff in the conduct of the courses.
 - ii. The establishment of a Language Centre integrated with the UCD Language course for Arts degrees, with a development of the courses to make them more relevant to the needs of the students wishing to pursue commercial and industrial employment.
 - iii. Some elements of the Faculty of Arts such as History and Geography, as well as elements of the Faculties of Commerce and Social Science.
 - iv. Transfer of the Irish Folklore Commission archives from Earlsfort Terrace
 - v. Any other purposes considered suitable, including the development of approved in-service courses for teachers, evening lectures for university students, approved adult education courses etc.
 - (a) The Curriculum and Examinations Board
- Arrangements might be made with the Curriculum and Examinations Board to make certain facilities, such as the college library, language laboratories etc. available to the Board in connection with some aspects of its work;

accommodation might be made available for meetings of the Board and meetings of its syllabus committees etc.

Any other purpose proposed by the Sisters of Mercy with the approval of the Minister for Education.

The document went on to set down the financial conditions of any arrangements that would arise out of the new role for the college. Basically, a college fund would be set up. Such amounts 'as may be determined by the Minister' would be paid annually into the college fund. In addition, the college would charge a rent for the use of the premises. The college fund would bear all expenses for payment of salaries to such staff as would be approved by the Minister for the administration of the college and for payment of pensions, gratuities etc.

The document also set out proposals for the continuing employment of existing staff – but not on the Carysfort campus. The document envisaged secondment of staff to 'various other colleges, schools and educational agencies', mentioning UCD, other university colleges and third level institutions, the Curriculum and Examinations Board, and 'Remedial Teachers etc. in Primary and Secondary schools.' In the case of members of existing staff for whom secondment arrangements might not be found feasible and for whom employment may not otherwise be available, 'discussions should take place between the Departments of Education and the Public Service and the recognised representatives of the members involved with a view to agreement on the terms of appropriate severance of employment arrangements.'

There was no longer any doubt about the fate of the staff. There would be no role for them in Carysfort in the years ahead. Their cards were marked. It would be redeployment, early retirement, secondment, or voluntary redundancy. Fortunately, notwithstanding the veiled threats by the Chairman of the MWG, compulsory redundancy would not be on the cards – thanks to IFUT which had ensured that the rights of staff to ongoing employment would be honoured. From that point onwards, IFUT worked tirelessly to ensure that their members would be redeployed on conditions acceptable to each individual member of staff. The complexity (and success) of those negotiations deserve to be recorded, as the outcome provided an excellent precedent for similar situations then and in the future.

The terms suggested by the MWG for the use of the building were unrealistic and bound to be unacceptable to the Sisters, and the MWG must have known that. UCD had already indicated that they were not willing to re-locate their Education Department or any other Departments to the Carysfort campus. Moreover, the proposals of the MWG were distinctly unfavourable to the Sisters

of Mercy. The Sisters would be left with responsibility for the campus and for any staff (e.g. security, catering or cleaning staff) remaining on campus, but there was no guarantee that grants provided by the Department of Education would cover the salaries and wages of those staff, much less any pension responsibilities that might accrue, or the costs of maintaining the campus. It was not surprising that the proposals of the MWG report relating to the use of the campus were not accepted by the Sisters of Mercy.

The Beginning of the Dispersal of Staff:

By summer 1987, the staff was resigned to their fate. Following the publication of the report of the MWG, IFUT began to negotiate redeployment opportunities for the academic staff. Within a short period, the Departments of Finance and Education agreed that any vacancies that came up in relevant university departments, colleges of education or other appropriate public or civil service positions (e.g. the inspectorate) could not be filled through public advertisement unless the post was offered first to a suitably qualified person from Carysfort, at a salary and on conditions consistent with their current Carysfort post. There were some concerns among staff initially when potential new ‘employers’ insisted on interviewing any staff they might be willing to redeploy, but most of us accepted this condition.

In the subsequent months, I myself attended three different interviews and was offered three different posts. I was offered a post as Principal Officer in the Department of Education, a post as a school inspector or a post as an academic member of the staff of the Education Department in UCD. I particularly enjoyed my interview for redeployment to the civil service. The members of the interview board included Don Thornhill, then a senior member of staff in the Office of the Revenue Commissioners and afterwards (in 1992) to be appointed Secretary of the Department of Education. Don asked me about my Ph.D. research and he was genuinely interested when I told him that it was about the administration and financing of Irish education – i.e. the history of the Department of Education from the 1830s to the 1930s. He was probably one of the very few people who had ever engaged with me in a scholarly way about my thesis. When I was offered the post of principal officer in the Department I was tempted to accept, but since my husband Bill was working there at the time, I felt it would not be a good idea for me to be there as well. I accepted an offer of redeployment to the Education Department of UCD, and since John Coolahan had just moved to Maynooth as Professor of Education, the lectureship post in History of Education in UCD was vacant.

By the beginning of the academic year 1987–8, the academic staff of Carysfort had begun to disperse. The Registrar, John Nolan, was appointed Registrar of the National University, following the death of its former Registrar, Michael Gilheany. Michael O’Dea, Head of the French Department was successful in his application for a publicly advertised statutory lectureship post in UCD and moved to UCD that autumn. Oliver O’Brien retired on age grounds having served 39 years on the staff of Carysfort. Leave of absence was granted to five members of staff – Michael Barry (Maths Dept); Maurice Bric (History Dept.); Michael Ryan (Education Dept.); Sr. Carmel Murtagh (Art Dept.) and Sr. Marian Reid (Library).

At the Board meeting of 24 June 1987 – a year before the College was due to close, there was an item on the agenda titled ‘How to mark appropriately the end of the Teacher Training tradition associated with OLM College Carysfort.’ There was also an item on the agenda about the re-location of the archives and records of the College.

Final Year

The final academic year, 1987/88, was surreal. While there were fewer than 180 students on a campus which could accommodate almost 1,000 students, the staff did everything possible to provide a normal academic environment for that



final cohort of students. Some staff members had already been offered and had accepted redeployment, and in that final year, some of us divided our time between the Carysfort campus and our new employment. I continued to lecture and tutor Carysfort students while also giving History of Education lectures to the H.Dip students in UCD. It was initially suggested that an Open Day would be held for staff and former students to mark the closure of the College as a college of education, but this idea was not pursued. Towards the

The flourishing magnolia at Carysfort College: planted by Sr. Regina as a delicate sapling in 1988, it aptly mirrors the grown

end of the year, board meetings were postponed or cancelled ‘for lack of an agenda.’ The final board meeting was held on Friday 3 June 1988.

The final student graduation ceremony was held in the College on 22 July 1988. Following the ceremony, Sr. Regina planted a magnolia tree at the back of the College near the Restaurant. Seamus Heaney wrote a poem specially for the occasion and a copy of this poem, illustrated by Sr. Regina with a pen drawing of the College building, was presented to every member of staff. (A copy of the poem and the drawing is reproduced on pages xx of this publication).

The Use of the Carysfort Campus for Educational Purposes?

While reluctantly accepting that the staff of the College would be redeployed, Sr. Regina had not given up hope that the Carysfort campus would continue to be used for educational purposes. In autumn 1987, she made a proposal to the Minister for Education, Mary O’Rourke, that the campus could be used as a National College of Music and Dramatic Arts with the existing Dublin College of Music as its nucleus.⁵² While recognising that the issue of how the campus would be deployed was ultimately a matter for the Sisters of Mercy, Sr. Regina outlined the proposal to the Minister at a meeting in the Minister’s office on 17 November 1987. According to a report subsequently written by Sr. Regina, the Minister ‘received the plan very favourably,’ Mary O’Rourke suggested that Sr. Regina should meet the Taoiseach, Mr. Charles J. Haughey, which she did, in the company of Mary O’Rourke and Leas Ceann Comhairle, Jim Tunney, on 10 March 1988. Mr Haughey listened with interest and then asked Mary O’Rourke to set up a Working Group to evaluate the feasibility and costing of the project.

This new Working Group (which included Sr. Regina) met in Carysfort on 28 March 1988 and worked intensively through April to complete its report. The Working Group found that the project was both feasible and desirable and having costed it in detail, recommended it to the Minister for Education. Minister O’Rourke seemed very favourably disposed to the project, and informed Sr. Regina of this on a few occasions⁵³. But from May 1988 until her resignation from the Presidency of Carysfort College on 30 September 1988, Sr. Regina had ‘no good news about the project to establish a National College of Music and Dramatic Arts in Carysfort.’

⁵² Papers in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy on Booterstown Avenue.

⁵³ Note from Teresita Durkan dated June 1991 in the archives of the Sisters of Mercy.

In any event, the Mother General of the Sisters of Mercy, Sr. Sebastian, was not enthusiastic about the proposal. To quote Sr. Regina: 'The mixture of elements from two separate parts of the educational system could be problematic. The College of Music belonged to the Dublin Institute of Technology and was part of the Vocational Education system, whereas Carysfort was a privately-owned institution.' Having said that, however, it would appear that the Sisters of Mercy might well have agreed to this proposal under certain financial conditions. Sr. Regina afterwards indicated that a sum of £4 million was mentioned at that time for the transfer of the campus to new ownership.⁵⁴

Even after her resignation as President of the College, Sr. Regina continued to pursue her dream that Carysfort would be used as 'A National College of Music and Dramatic Arts.' As late as May 1990, in a letter to *The Irish Times*,⁵⁵ sent from Valparaíso, Chile, she questioned why this proposal had not been pursued, prompting Sr. Sebastian to write to her on 4 June 1990, stating:

I am still puzzled about your proposal to give a present of the college to the State for a 'College of Music and Drama, a Centre for the Study of Foreign Languages, or a Youth Resource and Training College.' You know that you put forward these proposals vehemently over several years without success. ... To force buildings on an unwilling Government would be to ensure that these buildings would be empty and in a very short time become derelict.

In her letter to Sr. Regina, Sr. Sebastian instanced the case of Carriglea (Kill o'the Grange) which had been purchased some years before from the Christian Brothers for a Regional Technical College and 'is not going to be developed.' She also mentioned the 'awful condition' of other publicly owned buildings such as the National Library and 'decaying conditions in our National Gallery.' In the event, the proposal favoured by Sr. Regina that Carysfort College be made available for a National College of Music and Dramatic Arts, like so many earlier proposals, came to nought. During the year 1988/89, the campus was gradually vacated and its records, archives and other contents were distributed to various third level institutions, schools and convents.

⁵⁴ Letter from Teresita Durkan to the *Irish Times*, May 1990.

⁵⁵ By this stage she was on leave of absence from the Mercy Order, and living in Santiago, Chile.

The Sale of Carysfort College 1989

The eventual disposal of the Carysfort campus in 1990 was to become another public cause celebre. In summer 1989, the total Carysfort site of almost 70 acres was put on the market by the Sisters of Mercy. Outline planning permission had been secured for over 500 houses on the site. While developers were interested in the building land, the College campus and the land immediately surrounding it were not of interest to developers since they were zoned for educational use.⁵⁶

On 18 August 1989, the College and 15 associated acres were offered by the Sisters of Mercy to the government for £8.5 million. The Department of Education commissioned a report from the State Valuation Office which valued it at €3.8 million on 29 August 1989.⁵⁷ Negotiations took place between the Sisters of Mercy and the Department of Education in October 1989 but they came to nothing. A contract to buy all the property (including the College building and the surrounding land) was negotiated some months later with Davmac Ltd., a property development company, afterwards to go into liquidation. Davmac was not particularly interested in the College, because of its zoning. Before the sale to Davmac was completed, estate agent, Fintan Gunne of Gunne Estate Agents, negotiated the direct purchase of the College and some adjoining land on behalf of a client, Robert 'Pino' Harris. The price paid by Pino Harris was between £6.25 and £6.5 million, and the deal was completed in July 1990. Following the sale, a sum of £1.75 million was repaid by the Sisters of Mercy to the Department of Education in respect of 'the unexpended value of the grants' which had been provided for the earlier refurbishment of the building.⁵⁸

The same month, Gunne estate agents approached UCD and suggested it buy Carysfort for its business school. UCD decided there was no way it could afford the property and declined the offer. Then in early September 1990, Mary O'Rourke phoned UCD and invited the university to make a proposal to the Department of Education, the implication being that the Dept. would provide funding. As the President of UCD, Dr. Patrick Masterson, subsequently told the Public Accounts

⁵⁶ The events leading up and including the sale of the Carysfort campus were documented in the report of the Moriarty Tribunal and reported in detail in the newspapers at the time. This part of my article draws in particular on the following media reports – John Walshe, 'Vital Questions on Carysfort Deal have still not been answered' in *Irish Times*, 12 December 1991; Emmet Oliver 'Moriarty tribunal given files on Carysfort sale in 1990' *Irish Times*, 30 March 2000; Colm Keena 'The Carysfort Saga' in *Irish Times: Education and Living* section – 2 May 2000..

⁵⁷ Colm Keena, *The Carysfort Saga*, *The Irish Times: Education and Living*, 2 May 2000.

⁵⁸ Correspondence in the archives of the Sisters of Mercy, Booterstown.

Committee 'it was not so much a case of the university being pressurised as of its being made an offer it could not refuse.' During the following months, eight meetings took place between representatives of UCD and O'Rourke or Haughey, or both. No civil servants attended these meetings, despite some of them occurring in Government Buildings. UCD said it could only promise £2 million, and would also need an assurance from the government that running costs over and above the projected costs of the off-campus school would be paid from the Exchequer. However, in spite of assurances in this regard, UCD afterwards maintained that no additional funding in relation to running costs were provided by the Exchequer.⁵⁹

On 4 December 1990, the cabinet approved a proposal that funding be provided to UCD to enable it to purchase the Carysfort campus. No memorandum to cabinet was prepared and therefore the Department of Finance had no prior notice of the proposal. The Department of Finance opposed the decision, but a supplementary estimate was prepared and passed by the Dáil on 19 December. The amount was £9.7 million for the purchase and adaptation of the Carysfort premises. £8 million of this related to the purchase of the property, so Pino Harris had made a profit of between £1.5 and £1.75 million in six months. A donation of £1.5 million was made by Michael Smurfit towards the refurbishment costs of the Carysfort building on condition that the college was renamed the Smurfit School of Business. A total of £3.7 million was spent on renovations.⁶⁰

The sale of the Carysfort campus continued to be a source of political controversy during the following decade. Various articles and editorials in *The Irish Times* and other newspapers raised questions about the sale and purchase of the property.⁶¹ The issue was raised on a number of occasions in the Dáil, with opposition deputies suggesting that the Taoiseach, Charles J. Haughey personally orchestrated the whole deal and that he must have benefited in some way from the profit made by Pino Harris.⁶² A year after the sale, during a sometimes vicious Dáil debate on a motion of confidence in the government, Haughey denied initiating the purchase, and said it was Mary O'Rourke who suggested to him the idea of UCD buying the property, not the other way around. At the time O'Rourke did not contradict Haughey's version of events.

In some ways, it was not surprising that the Cabinet agreed that the building

59 Colm Keena, *op. cit.*

60 Letter dated 28 January 1992 from Sr. Sebastian to Sr. Regina. (Archives of the Convent of Mercy, Booterstown).

61 See for example, Christina Murphy and John Walshe 'Resentment Lingers over UCD's Carysfort Deal' in *Irish Times* 10 October 1991 and other articles by John Walshe in 1991.

62 Dick Spring alleged in the Dáil in 1991 that Haughey had orchestrated the entire transaction.

should be bought for UCD. From the very first meetings of the MWG set up by Minister Cooney in April 1986, it was clear that a takeover by UCD of Carysfort College was the favoured solution of the chairman of the HEA, Liam Ó Laidhin and the other members of the MWG. From the time of her appointment in spring 1987, Mary O'Rourke had been involved in various discussions about the future of the Carysfort building, so it would not have been surprising if she had initiated the purchase of Carysfort by UCD in September 1990.

However, the fact that so much public money was made available for the purchase, and that UCD so willingly accepted the offer of the purchase was, in my view, surprising. In 1986, UCD had been offered the Carysfort campus for free – provided some element of teacher education was maintained there – and had flatly refused to accept that offer. In 1987, the campus was offered to UCD at a sum of between £2 and £4 million, but UCD again refused to consider relocating any of its departments there. UCD had consistently indicated that they were strategically opposed to splitting the university campus. Yet when offered the same campus by Taoiseach, Charles J. Haughey, in 1990, President Masterson referred to it 'as an offer they could not refuse.'

Ten years later, the sale and purchase of Carysfort was investigated by the Moriarty Tribunal.⁶³ While the documents made available to the Tribunal confirmed the facts relating to the sale and purchase of the premises as set out above, the report of the Tribunal did not make a finding as to whether or not Charles J. Haughey benefited from the sale. In his article in the *Irish Times* in May 2000, Colm Keena concluded:

The purchase of Carysfort College by UCD, at the instigation of the then government of Charles Haughey, remains a very sensitive political subject, despite the passing of ten years. Mary O'Rourke, Minister for Education at the time, refused to answer questions about the affair when asked during the preparation of this article, and other persons connected with the sale also declined to discuss it.

Summary and Conclusions

While the precipitate announcement of the closure of Carysfort College by Minister for Education, Gemma Hussey, on 4 February 1986 came as a shock to

63 Emmet Oliver 'Moriarty tribunal given files on Carysfort sale in 1990,' in *The Irish Times*, 30 March 2000.

the staff and students of the College, the College had been prepared for some time for a possible re-focusing of its role. In 1984, aware that the child population of the country was falling, the College Board had prepared a Development Plan and had submitted it to the Government. The Plan recognised that it was likely that there would be a continuing reduction in the number of initial teacher education students in the years ahead and had proposed new and additional roles for the College, including the provision of in-service courses, other degree programmes and short courses in education-related areas.

At the same time that proposals for a new and extended role for Carysfort College were submitted to the Department of Education by the Carysfort College Board, the Department of Finance had raised the issue of 'considerable over-capacity' in colleges of education and had indicated that the closure of one college would make available a major third level building for other aspects of third level education. In spite of this, the proposals by the Carysfort College Board for an extended third level role for the College were rejected by the Department of Education, who appeared to have a very limited understanding of the expertise of staff and the potential of the facilities of Carysfort. Major refurbishment and modernisation of the building had been completed in 1982 at a cost of almost €3 million, providing the College with a state-of the art library and resource centre, a sports hall and modern and up-to-date auditoria and teaching spaces. In spite of that fact, members of the MWG cast doubts on proposals that the College could be used other than for initial teacher education.

The announcement of the closure of the College was made in February 1986 without any apparent realisation by the departments of Education and Finance of its implications. Before the announcement of the closure was made, it would appear that Department officials had failed to check the terms and conditions of employment of academic staff, which were such that staff could not be made compulsorily redundant. Neither had issues such as the legal ownership of the campus, or the conditions under which building and refurbishment grants had been sanctioned, been checked. Department officials seemed to be unaware that unlike national schools, which were the subject of official leases to which the Minister for Education was a party, the trustees of Training Colleges had never signed such leases. Had they checked this, they would have found that training colleges built before Independence in 1922 had received government loans, not grants, and the terms of these loans had long expired by 1986. Consequently, the Minister had no lien on the legal title of Carysfort Training College and could have no role in its disposal. The Minister could withdraw grants from Carysfort College,

but she had no power to close it. That decision could only be made by the Trustees, i.e. the Sisters of Mercy, who owned the College. Therefore, notwithstanding the fact that the Archbishop of Dublin was manager of the College, it was remiss of the Minister and her officials to ignore the Sisters throughout the long-drawn out negotiations on the future of Carysfort. The first official meeting with the Sisters was not held until February 1987 – a full year after the closure announcement had been made, and by that stage it was too late. The Sisters no longer had confidence in the MWG and were protective of their rights to the Carysfort property.

An analysis of the records of the College Board and of its sub-committees during the months following the announcement of the closure, indicate a willingness by the President, Sr. Regina and her staff to develop and implement a wide range of innovative and creative alternative uses for the College and staff. The Future Planning Group of the Board worked assiduously to produce credible and feasible alternatives – at a minimal cost to the State. Within a month of the announcement of the closure, it was clear that the State would make no financial savings from staff salaries as staff would have to be redeployed or offered attractive redundancy packages, and pensions would be the responsibility of the State indefinitely.

To-day, thirty-two years later, it is interesting to compare the proposals made by the Carysfort Board in 1986 with more recent Government policy documents on higher education and initial teacher education. At various stages in 1986 and 1987, the Carysfort Board offered to provide a range of activities which would be regarded as innovative and desirable today. The campus and staff would have been made available *gratis* for an Institute of Education, which would have included early childhood, primary and post-primary teacher education, initial and in-service, as well as educational research, and a headquarters for the Curriculum and Examinations Board. Such institutes of education were recommended twenty-five years later by an international review group on the re-structuring of teacher education, led by Professor Pasi Sahlberg – and DCU have recently set up such an Institute.⁶⁴

Among the other proposals suggested by the Carysfort College Board in 1986 were degree courses in Early Childhood Education and in Youth and Community Studies – proposals which were rejected as vague and unrealistic and not ‘tried and tested’ by the Ministerial Working Group, and particularly by its chair, Liam Ó Laidhin. Such courses were successfully introduced in Irish universities less than

64 Higher Education Authority, *Report of an International Team on the Restructuring of the Provision of Initial Teacher Education*, 2012.

a decade later and have since proved very popular.⁶⁵ The proposals submitted by the Carysfort Board for interdisciplinary degrees built around a core of generic skills, which were regarded by the MWG as ‘nebulous’ in 1986 would fit well with proposals in the government’s *Strategy for Higher Education to the year 2030, published in 2011*.⁶⁶

While the negotiations relating to redeployment may have been challenging for some members of Carysfort staff, the subsequent contribution of redeployed Carysfort staff in their new roles was impressive. While it may be invidious to highlight some and not others, I might be forgiven for mentioning the later appointments of Jim Walsh as Professor of Geography and Deputy President of Maynooth University; Michael O’Dea’s appointment as Professor of French in Université Lyon II (France); Sr. Carmel McCarthy’s appointment as Professor of Semitic Languages in UCD; the appointment of Maurice Bric as Professor of History in UCD and Founding Chair of the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences; Kevin Hurley’s appointment as Director of Lifelong Learning in UCD; Maureen Killeavy’s election as President of IFUT and of the Association of Teacher Education in Europe. I could go on – but these appointments are indicative of the calibre of staff who were dismissed by UCD in 1987 as unsuitable to teach above first year in a university. And the building which the MWG suggested ‘could not be successfully modernised and renovated’ is now, as the Smurfit School of Graduate Business Education, a stunning example of what outstanding architectural innovation and vision can do.

The closure of Carysfort College was a lost opportunity. The withdrawal of grants from the College by government was short-sighted and its alleged purpose at the time i.e. to save money for the exchequer, was not achieved. Instead, a fine purpose-built campus was lost to teacher education, and as the child population began to grow again and more primary teachers were required, more places had to be made available elsewhere for initial teacher education programmes. The opportunity for in-service education and for a new and innovative focus on preparing teachers specifically for the education of children and young people from less advantaged backgrounds, and children with learning difficulties and disabilities, was never availed of by the Department of Education. A young and highly skilled staff was dispersed throughout the public service, and the opportunity for a new

65 For example, when I was appointed Professor of Education and Head of the Education Department in UCC in 1993, I introduced the first B.A. in Early Childhood Studies in the country.

66 Department of Education and Skills, *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (the Hunt Report)*, 2012.

and exciting approach to teacher education set out in the Carysfort submissions was lost to the education system.

The decision of government in 1990 to pay £9.7 million (more than €20 million in to-day's prices) for the purchase and refurbishment of a campus which would have been available free for educational purposes three years previously will always be inexplicable. One can only hope that lessons were learned by the Department of Education from the closure of Carysfort College and that such short-sighted and cost-ineffective decisions will never be taken again.

While regretting the failure of the Department of Education to support the development of a revitalised and innovative Carysfort Institute of Education in 1988, it is satisfying today to witness the current use of the Carysfort campus as the UCD Smurfit School – a dynamic and busy graduate business school accommodating many thousands of graduate students. As if to mirror the growth and dynamism of the Smurfit School from 1990 to date, the delicate and vulnerable magnolia sapling which was planted by Sr. Regina in July 1988 is now a thriving and healthy tree whose branches are spread far and wide.

