

**Address by John White, General Secretary, ASTI,**

**to**

**IFUT Annual Delegate Conference**

**25<sup>th</sup> April, 2009.**

President, Colleagues,

**Shared History:**

I regard it as a great honour to be asked to address the Annual Delegate Conference of the Irish Federation of University Teachers. The ASTI and IFUT, of course, have a shared interest in education, and historically, our relationships have been close. For example, a distinguished General Secretary of the ASTI, Kieran Mulvey, also served as General Secretary of IFUT. Indeed, the precursor of the ASTI and indeed, IFUT, was the Association of Intermediate and University Teachers founded in the Municipal

Buildings in Cork in 1897. Indeed, when the ASTI was founded in 1909 at a meeting in the Mansion House in Dublin, the Secretary of the AIUT, P.F. Condon, became the first Secretary of the ASTI. So over one hundred years ago, we were seen as having a common interest. And I am very happy to report that relations between all of the teacher unions, ASTI, TUI, INTO and IFUT, are extremely cordial. During the past year, we had a joint executive meeting of the four unions and the Presidents and General Secretaries meet on a regular basis. On December 6<sup>th</sup>, we jointly organised a demonstration against the education cuts of over 50,000 people. Indeed, the M.C. on that day was your General Secretary, Mike Jennings.

IFUT has been playing a very important role in this move towards closer relationships. And here at the ADC, I want to pay tribute to your President, Joe Brady, for his good sense at our various meetings and particularly, I want to thank Mike Jennings, who in his

short time as General Secretary of IFUT, has impressed everybody with his clear and forceful contribution to the education conversation.

### **Co-operation Between Unions:**

Amongst the major concern of the ASTI at our Congress this year and, indeed, the major concerns at the Congresses of the other teacher unions were issues relating to cutbacks in funding, the casualisation of the profession and vetting. It came as no surprise to me that these very issues dominate your Conference also. Of course, we might place different emphases on particular aspects and we must always respect such difference. Nevertheless, much more unites us than divides us and we are far more likely to advance our interests in co-operation rather than division.

I believe the climate was never more favourable for closer co-operation between the four unions involved in education, the INTO,

TUI, IFUT and ASTI. Such co-operation would give a powerful and coherent voice to over 55,000 teachers and lecturers which would have to be heard. Such co-operation needs to have unity of purpose but I believe we can devise structures which will allow each of our unions to maintain its individual voice. Each of us will have to pool sovereignty in a range of areas on a phased basis. To begin with, competence could be agreed in such areas as trade union training, benefits such as car insurance, pensions, equality and the Teaching Council. And to safeguard the individual concerns of each union, the decision-making structure of a Federated Teachers' and Lecturers' Union would have to be delicately nuanced. For example the Management Council of such a federation would make every effort to reach a consensus view on any issue on which the Council is required to form a view. If any union declares, prior to a matter being formally decided that an issue is one of singular importance to the sector or members which it represents, the decision will require the assent of all unions.

Such formal co-operation can best advance the trade union and professional interests of teachers and lecturers and can be a powerful voice for academic freedom, learning and culture.

### **Suddenness of Recession:**

President,

We are living in extraordinary times. If someone were to say to me just one year ago that I would be addressing your conference in the context of cuts in take-home pay as a consequence of swingeing levies, tax increases, reductions in funding for schools and for universities, embargoes on promotions, I would not have believed it. One of the factors that has contributed to the feeling of uncertainty, the feeling that there is no solid ground to stand on is the suddenness of the upheaval. Of course, we have some pundits who claim they predicted the economic crisis – the numbers who predicted the crisis are rather like the number who fought in the GPO in 1916 – the number increases with the passage of time.

Far closer to the truth is the saying “those who claim they can predict the future are lying even if, by accident, what they say happens”.

We can surely, however, say that the harsh logic of the raw market ideology has been undermined. In this, the bicentenary of Darwin’s birth, the credo of the survival of the fittest, a credo, of course, never promulgated by Darwin himself, has been demolished as a basis for fostering a flourishing, orderly society. Paradoxically, from the ashes of this demolition can come the major hope for the creation of a society where a sense of social harmony and social cohesion is central. This, of course is not without its problems as a well-known trade unionist said: I’ve worked all my life for the end of capitalism; now it’s coming I was never so frightened.

## **Public Sector/Private Sector:**

In the climate of economic recession, much of the public discourse has been marked by an attempt to divide public and private sector workers. In this discourse, public sector workers such as teachers, lecturers and civil servants are almost made to feel as if they are parasites, sucking the life-blood out of the community. Part of this feeling is being generated by commentators whose God has died, that is the God of the triumphant market ideology and they are seeking a scapegoat. Scapegoat seeking is an unworthy activity. Public servants have been chosen as the scapegoats and we should not indulge in it but I think we can all agree that the ideology of the raw market, at least in its virulent form, has been found wanting and rather than admit this, certain commentators have chosen to demonise the public service and those who work in it rather than focusing on the uninhibited gambling by the banks fostered by light touch regulation. We reject this ideology.

## **Role of a Trade Union:**

I believe there has never been a greater need for unions to work together in a coherent and rational manner for the good of their members and of society in general. What we do as trade unions is that we regulate the relations between employers and employees. We make agreements. It is very easy to convince ourselves of the justice of our case. But, as somebody said in another context, you make peace with your enemies and not with your friends. (Though with the internecine quarrels within and between unions, you sometimes wonder). That is why I support David Begg and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in seeking to draw up a national solidarity pact with the government. Of course, it is a centre right government we are dealing with, as Jack O'Connor has stated, but surely we should exhaust every option before committing to industrial strife. All the education unions are committed to reversing the education cutbacks and I believe we will reverse them but it is likely to be a long campaign and to win it, we need not only

the support of our own members but also the support of the broader community.

### **Business Model:**

Education is ultimately a continuing attempt to understand the world and our place in it. The various subjects and disciplines are a means to advance this endeavour. Education thus must seek to strike a fair balance between contributing to economic prosperity, pure research and intellectual analysis. Of course, that sentence could be said to beg the question of not defining what the “fair balance” is. What we can say is that such a balance can only be attained by public engagement and discourse. It is, I believe, a political decision because ultimately in a democratic society, politicians make decisions but such decisions must be nuanced and qualified by ensuring that there are other loci of power in society including the pillars involved in the social partnership process and the universities. What we can say with some degree of conviction

is that an imposition of a business model on university lecturers where a mechanical view is taken of output is not educationally sound.

**Conclusion:**

President, colleagues,

I want again to thank IFUT for inviting me to address your conference and I want to wish you every success today in your deliberations and every success in your aim of achieving a university system of education which respects the great tradition of academic freedom and independent inquiry, contributes to economic prosperity and provides a quality education to our community.