

President's Address
Irish Federation of University Teachers
Annual Delegate Conference
April 2009

Fraternal Delegates, Guests, Delegates, Colleagues and Friends, it is a great pleasure to welcome you to the Annual Delegate Conference of the Irish Federation of University Teachers.

It's been an eventful year to put it mildly. Little did I think that when I addressed you last year that we were about to embark on a return to the 1980s without passing through the 1990s. We could see the signs of a slowdown and I expressed worries about the pace of investment and whether the knowledge society would get lost in the drive for the knowledge economy. How utopian those concerns now seem!

Change is all about us. The images that are used, the metaphors that are employed are different to those in vogue a year ago. New words are to the fore. After all, 'going forward' seems inappropriate when we are hurtling backwards. Let us take a few minutes to explore what these words may offer for us. While much is gloomy, nonetheless it is important to take what good we can from the circumstances of the day.

Third Level Rationalisation

The use of the word 'rationalisation' in conjunction with 'third level' makes my blood run cold. We have been there before and since we are in the 1980s, it is instructive to remind ourselves about the closure of Carysfort College. This was a kak-handed, ham fisted decision based on irrelevant and inaccurate data. The most scary thing was that the decision was persisted with even when the rationale was exposed as baseless. However, it need not be so in the future.... we have learned.. haven't we?.

John Kelly, the former Registrar of UCD had an interesting piece in last week's Irish Times. He argued that:

There is a need for a debate to arrive at a thoughtful and forward-looking definition of the public purpose of higher education so that we have a clear understanding of the role of the higher education institutions in our society and, conversely, of the Government's understanding of what it expects from them, and having achieved that, to institute a process of accountability to monitor their adherence to an agreed programme.

He is correct in most of what he says. The past few years we have been hurtling along with change piled upon change but without any coherent view of what we were trying to achieve. We were running too fast to think. We were looking at this index, setting this target, outlining this initiative. On the one hand we were building the knowledge society and on the other hand the knowledge economy though in some cases without any clue as to what these concepts involved. We operated with a funding model that was inadequate to either task and by a process of internal reallocation we saw monies provided for one purpose diverted to another.

The slowdown has provided time for a considered look at where we are. We have to get right the balance between our institutions as providers of education, as institutes for research and latterly as drivers of economic development through innovation and patents.

We do not have it right at the moment. The education role of the universities has been undermined and under funded. Research is increasingly being focused only on those activities that produce economic gain. It is clear that the universities have the capacity to assist economic development and this must be capitalized upon. But universities are also the places where we educate our citizens: the people who will shape not only the economy of tomorrow but the nature of future society. Research cannot just be about what we can sell. It has to be about the exploration of our environment past and present in the widest possible sense of the term, it has to be about the exploration of humanity in all its facets. It would be a very dull and dangerous world if economics drove everything we studied. This is what our wealth gives us the opportunity to do, and despite everything we are still wealthy; it would be criminal to neglect it.

So, we need a rational debate about how best to separate out or integrate these various competing or collaborative strands. We have a bit of time to do so as we are forced to draw breath. There is a lot of good work being done by colleagues across institutions coming together to form new collaborations. These bottom-up initiatives are what must be encouraged because we are the people who know our fields of endeavour; we have the energy, the ambition, and the common sense necessary.

It goes without saying that funding has to be sorted out once and for all. I'm not going to add to the debate here. The arguments are clear. Education costs money and it has to be paid for one way or another.

Of course, I cannot stay in an optimistic frame of mind for too long.

There is currently a review being undertaken of the third level sector. At least I believe so because we have heard nothing about it with the exception of what we have read in the newspapers. We have not been invited to sit on the committee, we have not been invited to make submissions and this for a body that is supposed to report before the year end. It has all of the hallmarks of a disaster in the making with ill-judged and short-term thinking within a narrow budgetary framework rather than a considered view as to how to get the best out of what we have.

It is clear that We are going to have to seize the initiative in this area and soon.

Reform

I started off this speech with a suggestion that we have to make the best of where we are at. I believe that there is no use in lamenting what has been lost. However, that is not to say that I am prepared to carry on as if nothing had happened. There is a price to be paid for the mess that we are in. If I (and you) have to get on with things, if we have to put our noses to the grindstone, our shoulders to the wheel and march boldly arm in arm, shoulder to shoulder, back to back towards our future [and endure all of the other clichés], then we are going to have to be tough about how it is done.

It cannot be business as usual for those who got us into the mess. Here we face a real fight and we have to be up for it. You see, there are many who would like to reinvent the recent past so that it becomes clear that we, as public servants, caused the mess.

So the piper has to be paid and we have cast around to find the suckers who will pick up the bill. The public sector is the obvious target. Our profligate spending and sybaritic lifestyles are responsible for the mess that we are in and the solution is clear – cull us (or reform us if you are being nice)! It is not just the political parties of government who take this line. Fine Gael has become tedious in chanting this mantra at every occasion. It is tedious because it is not backed by analysis and we are treated as members of an undifferentiated lump. Even

the Labour Party now beats the drum that we need to be reformed. But like all repetitive beats, it eventually is absorbed and internalized and it is no wonder that the general public now believe it as a matter of dogma. I was greatly taken by Declan Kelleher's [past president of INTO] hope that we soon have a government that is led by the left. My problem is that I am not at all sure where we would find enough left wing politicians. We and the remainder of the public service have been demonized, excoriated, vilified, berated, and condemned to an unprecedented degree. Hardly a day goes by without a newspaper article or a phone-in that does not focus on some aspect of our appalling nature. It is a wonder that any of us dare appear in public! We need to apologise for our salaries, our pensions, our allowances, our promotions, our holidays. We need to apologise for having a job!

It is pernicious and it is pervasive. In fact, if any ethnic group had been subjected to what the public sector has been subjected there would be prosecutions under the heading of incitement to racial hatred. Even worse, we have begun to believe what is being said about us. We find ourselves undermined and we start to wonder if there might not be something in what is being said about us.

We need to get up off our knees and stand up for ourselves. There is a problem, the problem has to be faced but we will face it together with the 2m other people who remain in employment. You would think from some of the commentators that the only people in secure employment are in the public sector and that our security is absolute in some way. Therefore the context is public sector versus unemployment – Joe Bloggs is out of a job therefore we must hammer the public sector?

The piece in Wednesday's Irish Independent is typical. Shock, Horror!! the Independent has 'revealed' that 300+ earn more than €165,000 euro in the public service.

The article goes on to make the juxtaposition –

The scale of the huge public sector pay packets is revealed as more than 16,000 private sector workers lost their jobs last month.

So! nobody in the private sector earns this kind of money? Those jobs might not have been saved if their bosses reduced their salaries? You might argue as to whether ANYBODY is worth that kind of money but it is not a public sector issue only.

Unemployment may have reached 10% of the workforce. Let us allow for another 10% - 20% as being in vulnerable employments. And let us not forget that many employers find the current circumstances as a convenient means of reducing employment, diminishing conditions in order to drive up productivity and boost profits. That leaves 70% of the labour force in pretty well the same employment position. The burden of unemployment is not ours alone to shoulder, there are plenty of shoulders.

Sharing

Another word much in use is 'sharing'. Now it normally goes with 'caring' but you can't ask for too much. We hear of the need to share the burden. Everybody agrees with this! I recently listened to a right-wing economist (is that a tautology? I sometimes think it is given the composition of so many expert panels!) who counselled that we should not dwell on who caused the problem but rather develop a partnership approach to sharing the burden. Now, I did not detect any sense of irony in his voice – maybe his wit was too dry. But taking it at face value, I find this invitation to share problematic.

I can see the necessity to 'share' the problem but it really galls me that those who now invite me to share the pain did not invite me to share the gain, nor would they ever do so in the

future. Remember Benchmarking I and Benchmarking II? We hope to get out of this pit in the not too distant future but I wonder if future gains will be shared on the same basis as the pain?

Now, while the image of a densely populated gibbet outside Government Buildings has its appeal, I would prefer to go after the money that these people salted away during the boom times. It has not all gone – not all of it has disappeared. I'm prepared to share the pain when they've given back their gains. When you take it that the saving achieved by the State in the most recent bloodletting barely equates to the size of the loans handed out by Anglo Irish Bank to a handful of people, you see I hope what I am talking about. Loans, by the way, that I am now supposed to be happy to take on as debts.

We have seen a loss of between 10-16% in our salaries in a period of four months. That is a major contribution. Has the rest of the economy, the country, dialled back its expenditure, its cost base to the same degree? If it has, there might be a way out for us. But has it?

I can see every sign of attempts to return to business as it was before. I see no sense of humility among those who caused the problem; no diminution of greed; no desire to do things in the future in a different way. In that context, our answer has to be 'Enough!' 'I've done my bit – look elsewhere for the money!'

Much as it pains me, I do not see any sign that partnership as a concept is alive, let alone alive and well, either locally or nationally. I would like to be wrong about this but I have heard nothing from Congress that would lead me to believe that partnership will be the way forward.

Levy

We don't seem to be able to use the word 'tax' any more: levy is the in-word. We, as a collective, swallowed the pension levy. I'm not sure that we realized what more lay in store for us in the shape of income and health levies. And, without sounding pious, there was a feeling among members that there was a need to play a part, take a role in national recovery. It is probably true that we should never have allowed a system to develop where our paying for our pensions was not explicit. The idea of notional payments or deflated salaries in lieu of contributions cuts no ice in the outside world. It mattered not a whit that Benchmarking II justified, in part, its decision to award no increases by attributing a notional value to our pensions when doing their salary calculations. Equally, though, it was probably a mistake to have been as quiet about it as we were. It has shown the government that it can legislate significant rights away without an iota of opposition. They would never have attempted 'public interest' legislation in the past but they now feel that they can draw from that well again in the future. There are great dangers for us in that. I'm not going to spell out the dangers here – I do not want to put bad thoughts into peoples' heads but there is also another lesson to be learned ... there is not a lot of sympathy out there for us.

Regulation

Regulation is another word that is back. It's only a year since you had to wash your mouth out with soap if that word passed your lips. Our EU commissioner was quoted just a year ago as saying that hedge funds did not need external regulation. They were big boys, they knew what they were doing!

I felt I had stepped into an alternative reality when I heard him quoted on RTE in February 2009 saying “that the regulatory and supervisory systems in Europe and the US had tolerated relaxed lending practices and the accumulation of unsustainable debt by households, individuals and companies” and that it had to change.

But that wind is blowing through the third level sector too. As recently as last February, I and members of the National Executive had an animated discussion in the Higher Education Authority about its unwillingness to police the manner in which universities spent public money and, most especially, the way in which they used the Framework Agreement – a mechanism that permitted them to employ people off scale with impressive terms and conditions. We expressed our concern that high-flyers were being recruited who would have no contact with students, who had teaching duties omitted from their contracts. We spoke of administrators getting super salaries. It was not just a waste of scarce resources with no benefit cost analysis before or since but it damaged morale. We were told that it was not the business of the HEA to interfere with the internal workings of the universities. They knew what they were doing! Imagine my surprise to read in the Sunday Times only two weeks ago that:

Students in Irish universities are being denied the expertise of talented staff because they have been recruited on non-teaching contracts, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) has claimed. The third-level policy body has advised universities and institutes of education to remove clauses from contracts which keep “stellar” researchers in the laboratory and out of the classroom. The chief executive is further quoted as saying that departures from salary scales would, in the future, only happen in the research area.

If St Paul was on the road to Damascus today, he would have to queue up for conversion.

Now, there is a big difference between regulation and direction and this is where I would most disagree with John Kelly's thesis to which I referred above. We have to be careful that the regulation we get in the third level sector is appropriate. We do not need to be directed by those who do not have a clue about education and whose horizon is limited to the tip of their noses.

Solidarity

Solidarity is another word with which we need to come to terms and embrace. We are public servants and we are educators. In the eyes of commentators and in the viewpoint of many in the public we should occupy the innermost circles of hell. If you think I exaggerate, listen to the hysteria that was generated on radio and the print media during the annual conferences of our sister unions.

There is great value to being in a union such as IFUT. We are small but we are focused and we are formidable in education matters. No general union can match the quality of our knowledge and expertise when it comes to third level education matters or match us when it comes to straightforward industrial relations issues that deal with the sector. More often than not, we win! The Universities increasingly attend the Labour Court in the company of senior counsel. I suppose it is a compliment; they don't feel confident taking us on by themselves. But it is an outrageous waste of public money to deal with industrial relations in this manner and we intend to put the details before the public in the near future.

We had a victory in the Labour Court recently that vindicated academic freedom. Now, the Court had never heard of the concept before we introduced it, let alone understood it, but we won and huge credit is due to Mike Jennings for his skill. The recommendation of the Court has been quoted internationally as an important copper fastening of what is an essential

principle for any academic. You get a sense of how important was the judgment when a full report is carried in the Times Higher Education.

But... I am sorry to say that we cannot rely on the Labour Court or the LRC to vindicate our rights into the future. As a union, we are not known for our militancy. Indeed some people still do not know that we are a union. It goes against the grain for some of our members to contemplate industrial action.

We are no longer going to safeguard what is important to us, either personally or educationally by writing impassioned letters to the Irish Times, even if we thought that the august organ would publish our missives.

I was very pleased that over two-thirds of the membership voted to support the Congress Day of Action. This was a ringing endorsement of the leadership of the union and recognition that sometimes action is the only option. I had to smile when one member asked me if I was not concerned that we had 'only a two-thirds' majority!! I think the Government would have settled for that over Lisbon, don't you!!

However the point is that we have to realize that our world has changed. Time was when the university was run by academics. Many of them were members of this union and when we sat down to discuss a problem we did so with a shared framework of values. They put their union membership in their back pockets and we had our debates, discussions and rows. I'm absolutely sure it was not a golden age but whether golden or just brass-plated it provided us with a means of doing business that is no longer there.

Universities are increasingly run as businesses, by managers who have no sense of community or of 'the university' as a concept. They see us as employees whose only role is to do as bidden. They see our terms and conditions of employment as something to be ignored, circumvented and unilaterally changed. They see our moderate tendency as a sign of weakness and they exploit it. Industrial relations have become increasingly characterized by aggressive behaviour rather than by common sense.

It gives me no pleasure to say this but that is my assessment having been in this chair for three years now. We need to be tough and we need to be prepared to assert our rights if we are to get the respect that we deserve. I know that this is hard for some people but I see no other way.

We have already had our pockets picked by the State simply because they could do it. Don't think that it is going to stop there or that there is an acknowledgement that enough has been wrung from us. Industrial action has to be part of our suite of tactics for the future.

Academics have been targeted recently as being overpaid with comparisons being offered with the UK. The companion word with 'overpaid' is 'underworked', so you may take that as read.

Now, of course, the comparisons are flawed – not that the media would be interested – naturally one picks the point of comparison that best suits the moment. Sterling has dropped in value by 30% in the past year and purchasing power in the UK has always been better.

But that aside, it is true that we do better than our colleagues in the UK. There is nothing to apologise for there. They were hammered in the early 1980s by Margaret Thatcher who changed utterly the nature of university employment – among other things bringing in individualization which resulted in vastly different payments being made to people doing the same job. They never recovered from that – it is almost 30 years.

We have to be tough. I doubt that the HEA would have seen the light on the need to assert itself without the discussions we had with them around the information that we obtained under Freedom of Information. I doubt that universities would have published the details of the exceptional payments to certain academics if we had not already got the information under FOI. Good work was done by some excellent colleagues. We will occasionally get blow-back from these initiatives. We will find our own activities under scrutiny. That's the price we have to pay. It's all part of standing up for ourselves instead of hoping that nobody will notice us or that they will think that we are nice but harmless people.

We need to do two practical things.

We need to recruit!

There are too many of our colleagues outside the union. There are those ideologically opposed, there are the freeloaders and there are the forgetful. It is everyone's job in this room to get these people within the realm of the union. It is not an impossible task if each of us undertook to stick a membership form under the nose of a colleague, especially one in the latter category.

I will be blunt and say that is my belief that we should not offer membership to people who wait until they have a problem to seek to join. They have enjoyed the fruits of our labours without payment for years, without having to work for it. I am all for conversion and redemption but we should not be fools at the same time.

AND

We need to co-operate!

When it comes to national issues, we need friends. The Universities have recognised the importance of scale and act increasingly and collectively as the IUA, even in trade union matters. Our friends are here in the room today. They are the members of the other education unions. Others will judge what I have achieved during my years as President but I take a great deal of personal pleasure from the fact that our relations with the TUI, the ASTI and the INTO are better than they have ever been. We have become comfortable with each other: we have seen that we can work together. We have a lot to do to capitalize on the possibilities that are now open to us but we now sit at the same table talking the same language.

IFUT

We have our friends and we have a strong union. Our General Secretary has raised our public profile significantly. We are quoted and our opinions are sought. We have redeveloped our website into a resource for members and more work there will enhance its value.

We have reformed our structures to make us leaner and more responsive and we saw the benefits of that during the recent ballot.

We are fortunate in our General Secretary, Mike Jennings and in Phyllis Russell our irreplaceable administrator. We are fortunate in the people who serve at national and local level.

It has been my honour to serve this union for three years as President. I have enjoyed my time and I will miss it – this is a good organization to be part of with good people. I am proud to be in the company of those who served before me in this position: people I admire and hold in the highest esteem. Hugh Gibbons takes over from me at the close of business today. Hugh's commitment to the union has been long, sustained and generous. I wish him the very best for what is bound, given the country's circumstances, to be a difficult two years and I am sure that you will support him as you have supported me.

Thank you.