

The Educational Institute of Scotland

Address to the 163rd Annual General Meeting

Perth Concert Hall, 5 June 2009

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

President, guests, colleagues.

To paraphrase the well-known song...”What a difference a year makes”!

Since we last met,

- * our football team has been huffing and puffing its way towards the habitual failure to qualify for the world cup finals
- * the Scots’ reputation for being canny – we like to say “fiscally prudent” – has been shattered by events surrounding the Royal Bank of Scotland and HBOS.
- * we were encouraged to buy in to the idea of an “arc of prosperity” of small successful countries around us – like Ireland and Iceland.
- * Scottish pupils didn’t seem to shine too brightly in the results from the international comparative study under TIMSS
- * along comes the threat of a pandemic of swine flu
- * and along comes an even bigger pandemic that infects a significant proportion of our elected representatives – albeit confined to the precincts of Westminster.

So, we have seen better years.

Now we know that politicians have rarely enjoyed much public acclamation. And it is very difficult for public servants - such as teachers - members of a profession that is so often on the receiving end of carping criticism – to resist the temptation to indulge in some *schadenfreude* at their expense. But maybe we have seen enough of that.

Just as we resent the good name of our profession being tarnished by the bad behaviour of a few – so too must we recognise that not all politicians are on the make. There are some good politicians and we need them as an essential part of the democratic landscape, elected by, and accountable to, citizens, and serving the public interest, rather than self interest.

Recent events have been corrosive and damaging – not just to personal or professional reputations, but also to democracy itself. There is a real risk that ordinary citizens will feel utterly alienated and detached from the democratic process. And that is dangerous.

As teachers, we need not only to inculcate in young people an appreciation of the importance of democracy and its associated values, but also lead by example.

And that is a point to which I shall return in relation to our own working.

Now the economic recession has developed across a wide range of countries, at a pace and to a degree that no one seems to have foreseen a year ago. Not only has it brought some major companies and corporations to their knees, it has also brought down some governments and has taken some countries to the brink of bankruptcy and dependence upon IMF and EU rescue packages.

Even now, we do not know how deep it will be, how long it will last and how it will affect us all. Some think we are being too pessimistic and talking everything down. Others think the worst is yet to come.

The danger is that we all become so desperate for recovery that we will welcome it in any shape or form. I hope not. I hope we will not simply see a return to what we had before.

While Sir Fred Goodwin has understandably borne the brunt of criticism from many quarters – keep in mind that something must have been rotten with the system that made this all possible. Indeed, the same could be said of the MPs' expenses scandal.

Maybe the financial mess we are in wouldn't have arisen if bankers had been required to hold to the proper standards of that profession instead of being driven by those in it to make a fast buck to disregard those standards and the prudential practices associated with it.

Some of us are old enough to remember the days when you went to a bank for cautious and trusted advice – before it got to the point where a visit became an ordeal where you had to fend off endless attempts to sell you this or that financial product you neither wanted nor needed.

And I have seen it reported that Fred Goodwin doesn't even have a professional banking qualification. So maybe there is also a lesson to be learned by those critics who believe we don't need qualified teachers as leaders of our schools. Or education professionals at the head of local authority education services.

But, its too easy – and we are really good at it – first to lionise, then demonise, individuals. There's more to it than a few rogues running around.

One MP offered the view that Scotland might be seen as a small country with a very large bank attached, a neat expression of one of the problems we face. What we really need is a rebalancing of power between corporations and democratically accountable governments acting in the interests of all their citizens – and not dazzled by the interests of the few very rich, the so-called “entrepreneurial class”.

Social progress has to be seen as no less important than economic growth. There is a clear need for a strong regulatory framework that has been shown to be so lacking.

Is it not notable that our profession is highly regulated – while the entrepreneurs regard that as an unacceptable restriction on their freedom to do as they like? Compare and contrast the relative contribution to the well-being of this country from the efforts of teachers and those of the banks. The banks for whose recklessness we are all now paying and will be paying for years to come.

It is right that teaching is regulated – after all, that is what the EIS was originally formed to do in 1847. Of course, today, that function is performed by the GTCS. And at the heart of the GTCS is the concept of a self-regulating profession, acting in the public interest.

We welcome the consultation on proposals to reform the GTCS in order to create the first fully independent, professional, self-regulating body for teaching in the world. I hope the Scottish Parliament will have the confidence to give the GTCS fully independent status and all that means. But our support for the GTCS is wholly conditional on the *sine qua non* of a majority of Council members being teachers, elected by their fellow teachers, to whom they will be accountable for their performance.

All of us know that the GTCS is playing an ever bigger part in the professional lives of teachers – through setting and owning the various professional standards for teachers and much more active involvement in decisions concerning both professional conduct and competence.

It is critically important therefore that teachers play an active part in determining who serves on the Council. A new Council will be elected this September and the EIS is recommending a number of candidates as worthy of support.

I referred earlier to the importance of being active participants in democratic processes. Not only do I urge every one of you to ensure that you vote in the September GTCS elections – but I also ask that you ensure your colleagues do likewise. It is futile for us to advocate professional self-regulation, only for the profession itself to show a lazy disregard for the whole process. Last time the turnout was just 22% - in the case of secondary teachers it was just 19%. Teachers cannot afford to repeat such a casual approach to this matter at the very time when Parliament is considering what status and powers to grant the GTCS for the future.

Looking forward, the economic recession sets the framework – the context in which much of our work will be undertaken in the coming period.

While the old guard who got us into this mess may be down, they are not out. They want a return to “business as usual” as soon as they can get it. Already we hear them squealing against the increase in income tax to 50% on earnings over £150k (incidentally, not a problem for any teachers I know). It seems they won’t get out of their beds to work in that case or will have to flee abroad to escape it! Maybe we would be better off without them.

But the clouds are gathering over the public sector.

One thing is certain – many countries will take a long time to repair the public finances that have been ravaged by the cost of propping up failed banks and financial institutions.

Isn’t it ironic how PFI was promoted as the only show in town for renewing the school estate because we couldn’t countenance having all the debt showing on the

public balance sheet. Not a problem, it seems, when it comes to throwing eye-watering amounts of money at rescuing banks!

And how ironic - the government now largely owns banks like HBOS and RBOS that are big players in PFI, so all the risk that supposedly transferred to the private sector is back with the public sector.

Lets forget about PFI - and the Scottish Futures Trust – let's simply have publicly run and publicly funded school renewal schemes and get on with it without any more ado.

But of course, attention will turn to the public sector which will no doubt be expected to pay more than its share of the price for resolving a problem which it has had no part in creating. That means we will face the dual pressure of public service spending cuts and a demand to extract more for less from those working in the public sector.

These are critical years ahead for education.

We are already seeing the first signs of attacks on teachers' salaries and on jobs and on pensions. Our members in HE have been offered a paltry 0.4% pay rise.

We make no apologies for the teachers' 3 year pay agreement. It is in times like this that the public sector catches up a little on the deficit built up as the private sector raced ahead in the good years.

The schoolteachers' agreement was the product of free collective bargaining amongst consenting adults in the tripartite Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers. It entailed risks for us all – not knowing what future movements in wages or prices would be. But we all agreed – unions, the Scottish Government and COSLA, the collective voice of the 32 local authorities that employ teachers – to carry that risk on the basis that we preferred the certainty a 3 year agreement would bring.

The EIS wanted a trigger for a re-opener in the event of unforeseen developments – but both COSLA and the Government set their faces against it. So we have an agreement through to March 2011.

I referred earlier to the loss of trust in politicians. In the eyes of teachers, nothing would do more to destroy that trust than for politicians – be they local or national – to seek to resile from the agreements to which they are a party. This is a key test of the honesty and integrity of Scotland's politicians.

We will honour that agreement and we will expect our negotiating partners to do likewise.

And, while on the subject of salaries, I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the tremendous resolve and determination shown by our members in Ayr College in pursuit of a fair pay settlement. This has been one of the most bruising and protracted disputes in Further Education and has involved significant sacrifices by members. We should also acknowledge the unprecedented levels of concrete support provided by the EIS – a level of support that cannot be matched by any other Scottish education union – existing or putative.

I hope that the arbitration service of ACAS will not only settle the dispute but that both sides will move on and seek to work constructively to restore sound working relationships for the period ahead.

Even before the recession was biting, Scottish local authorities were managing to cut around 1,000 teachers from their workforce in the year up to last September..

I confess I am no economist but I have a problem understanding the logic of training teachers for unemployment.

- Without jobs - they pay no tax or NICs – so the Treasury receipts are down.
- Without jobs - their spending dries up and the suppliers of retail goods and services suffer
- Without jobs – they rely on state support as unemployed
- Without jobs - both their time and the public funds invested in their training are wasted.

Surely it is far more logical to maximise the use of this valuable resource of newly trained teachers when there is so much needing to be done in our schools?

I won't reopen the debate we have had this morning on Curriculum for Excellence. However, to borrow a phrase from a fellow general secretary, it has to be said of Curriculum for Excellence that it is a bit like many of Ryanair's airports. They are a long way away from where we need to be.

If there is one thing on which I believe there is widespread agreement, that is the need for more time. Time for every teacher to engage, to discuss, to prepare, to get their heads around what is being described as a major, transformational curricular change.

That means investing in CPD and creating the space for teachers, away from their daily teaching duties, to work on CfE. We have the demand and we have the human resource available to meet that demand. So let's employ teachers to create the conditions for successful implementation of CfE. Too much has been invested by too many on this work for it all now to turn to dust.

We are also seeing the right wing press and some political parties turning their guns on so-called "gold-plated" public service pensions.

These attacks are based on the politics of envy – a desire to inflict equality of misery on all workers since the private sector profiteers are progressively destroying their superannuation schemes to protect their shareholders' interests.

- * They ignore the major reforms of 2005 which raised the retirement age to 65.
- * They ignore the increase in the contributions we pay into our pensions throughout our working lives.
- * They ignore the commitment to introduce cost sharing and a cap on increases for the future
- * And they talk of taxpayers having to underwrite public pensions – as if teachers don't themselves pay taxes. They pay more taxes than many of the critics who hide themselves and their wealth in unregulated, off-shore tax havens.

And I do not apologise for returning to the subject of class sizes and the government's promise to maintain teacher numbers in the face of falling rolls.

We all understand that the government itself does not employ teachers – local authorities do. But the government has entered a partnership arrangement with local authorities – the so-called Concordat and associated Single Outcome Agreements.

We have warned from Day 1 about our doubts as to how robust this arrangement would be. As time goes by, our scepticism seems ever more justified.

Only two weeks ago, when the BBC trailed our AGM business, the education spokesperson from COSLA was quoted as saying, *“We need to clarify the incorrect impression that local authorities received additional funding to help deliver reduced class sizes in P1-3 – this is simply not the case. There are no resources in the settlement to reduce class sizes”*.

I think the government has a different view. We are always being told that record sums of money are going into education. So where is it going once it disappears into the coffers of the Councils?

And going back to last Christmas, COSLA responded to our press release on this matter by attacking what it described as our focus on *“just measuring inputs like numbers of teachers”*.

Excuse me, but was that or was that not part of the deal COSLA made with the Government?

The Government declares a commitment to holding teacher numbers, and claims it has provided the money to make that possible, while COSLA say they are only interested in outcomes and don't “do” teacher numbers or headline budgets any more.

As I said this time last year, there is no Concordat – in the classical sense of the term, that is “hearts together”. The reality is a growing gulf between what COSLA collectively, and some of its member councils individually, believe and are prepared to do, vis a vis the declared position of the government.

The question that grows louder by the minute is what will the government do about it? The local authorities have had their chance and too many have failed to make progress – some of them quite consciously and deliberately. Time is running out and the September 2008 census suggested that 14 councils have made no progress whatsoever on cutting class sizes. There is little ground for optimism that the September 2009 picture will be any better.

And one Council declares that far from working towards 18 maximum in P1-3, it will regress to the statutory limit of 30.

It is time now for the government to bite the bullet and move to promote regulations to limit class sizes across all our schools. I know it is difficult to secure legislation as a minority Administration, but all MSPs, of all parties, should be challenged to vote

against legislating to cut class size – to vote down the chance to deliver on the promises they nearly all made at the last election.

But this poses a bigger question – a question about the very nature of the relationship between the Scottish Government and Scottish Local Government, particularly in relation to the stewardship of the school education system.

The EIS has long been a supporter of the central role of local authorities, as a key player in a tripartite relationship, of social partnership, relaunched with the 21st Century Agreement in 2001. But that support is not unconditional.

If nationally, parties make manifesto promises, they must have the tools, the means of securing delivery. They cannot hind behind soft, touchy-feely understandings with councils or periodic bi-lateral chats and visitations. It is clear that some councils see themselves as bigger than the government when it comes to running schools and determining education policy and are determined to plough their own furrow.

> When we look at the desultory approach of some councils towards Curriculum for Excellence in its early stages,
 > and the over-zealous approach of others to testing and league tables and the target-driven agenda,
 > and most of all, if they preside over successive rounds of education spending cuts and service reductions in the coming period
 perhaps the time is not far away when a serious debate will begin about what is the real value added by local authorities to the life and work of our schools.

Colleagues, if ever there was a time for investing in education, that time is surely now. Economic recovery will have to be built on a well-educated, highly skilled – indeed, a reskilled workforce. All the evidence points to a growth in demand for a higher qualified and adaptable workforce, while the share of jobs needing only low levels of education attainment will shrink significantly.

As the Spring European Council noted:-

“It is precisely in times of economic difficulty that the key strategic importance of sustaining open and efficient, high quality education and training systems – as a means of enhancing future competitiveness while fostering social cohesion and active citizenship – must continue to be emphasised.”

And the European Commission was right to state:

“Skills upgrading is critically important for Europe’s short term recovery and longer term growth and productivity, for its jobs and its capacity to adapt to change, for equity, gender equality and social cohesion.”

This should place education – especially further and higher education – at the heart of economic recovery plans. And indeed we already hear of record numbers of college and university applications – a demand our establishments seem unlikely to be able to meet. While we very much welcome yesterday’s announcement of an additional

£28M for FE over the next 2 years, it is perverse that this comes in the very week we learned of Telford College aiming to shed 57 academic and related posts.

But we must not allow education to be reduced to a mere economic instrument, serving the needs of the labour market alone. I regret the Funding Council advising FE colleges to forget about recreational-type courses in favour of courses that focus only on enhancing job readiness of students.

We need to continue to campaign for the **social**, as well as the economic, dimension of education.

- * Education which develops “responsible citizens”
- * who can think independently
- * who play an active role in civic and political life
- * who are committed to democratic values – to social justice and equality
- * who are creative and innovative
- * who have an appreciation of various cultural forms and the arts

The next two years will be dominated by the state of public finances and the run up to, and fallout from, the next General Election.

The deteriorating public finances will galvanise those who would return to the old failed policies – privatising what they can, and cutting public service investment where they can’t.

As an EIS, our big challenge over the coming period is to persuade our politicians as they move towards election mode, to continue to invest in public education and in the people who work within it.

Please do not underestimate the scale of that challenge. It is going to ask some really hard questions of us all.

I said at the start we have had better years.

But it has been a good year for the EIS overall.

Your printed report shows some of the range of work which we have undertaken over the year. We are actively included and involved in working with a wide variety of bodies and organisations in the field of education. The EIS is a serious and respected contributor to Scottish education and civic society more widely.

Our strength lies in our membership – the fastest growing of any teachers’ organisation in Scotland, once again breaking barriers to reach an all time high – 61,560 in total.

It is on this foundation that we can speak with authority on behalf of the whole profession. No organisation is more representative, more legitimate or more credible.

It is from our membership that we draw our arguments, based on the real experience of people working on the front line in our schools, colleges and universities – but informed by a commitment to high professional standards and to the interests of the pupils and students whom we serve.

The EIS is good at **representative** democracy – and I thank all of those who work so hard for their colleagues – be they school or college representatives, Health & Safety Representatives, Learning Representatives, Local Association officials, or members of Council and its Committees and, indeed, yourselves as delegates.

Colleagues, to meet the challenges ahead, we need, not only to renew ourselves and bring on the next generation of representatives and activists, but also to develop a much greater involvement and engagement of ordinary members. We need to move towards a more **participatory** democracy at every level. In short the EIS itself needs to adopt some of the aims of Curriculum for Excellence – promoting “confident individuals” and “effective contributors”.

I call on you, as leaders of this Institute, to take that back to your branches and associations and do all you can to help the EIS adapt to be ready to fight the battles to come over the next few years in pursuit of the aims enshrined in our Royal Charter

* Promoting sound learning

* advancing the interests of education and the welfare of teachers generally in Scotland.

They are as relevant today as they were when we first adopted them in 1851.

Ronnie Smith
General Secretary