



The Educational  
Institute of Scotland

# NEWS RELEASE

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## **EIS President: Protecting Education & Public Services vital in economic downturn**

The outgoing national President of the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), David Drever, has today (Thursday) delivered his keynote address to the EIS Annual General Meeting in Perth, and told delegates of the vital role that education and a strong public sector will play in helping the country through the global economic downturn.

Addressing AGM delegates at Perth Concert Hall, Mr Drever said, “In this period of economic recession, we need to speak up loudly and articulately in defence of our public services. We need to state unequivocally that a society’s maturity and degree of civilization is measured by the extent to which it nurtures its children, protects its vulnerable members, and cares for its elderly. All the evidence of our recent past shows that this can best – indeed can only – be done by a fully funded, accountable, public sector.”

Highlighting the important role of schools, colleges and universities, Mr Drever added, “Education, as delivered by our schools and colleges, must be at the heart of that public sector. It is a truism that education has a part to play in achieving a fairer and more equitable society, and certainly there is sound economic sense in having a well educated workforce. However in a world whose staples are wealth, celebrity and glamour, and where role models are defined by their ‘vaulting ambition’ and selfish greed, there is a crucial civilizing role for schools and colleges. In educating the whole person – cognitively, socially, emotionally, and in an atmosphere of cooperation and shared learning – we will be equipping our children and young people with the ethical, intellectual and practical life skills that will allow them to “work as if they live in the early days of a better nation”.

Commenting on the factors which led to the current economic crisis, Mr Drever said, “Despite the hard sell and the spin, the reality is that privatised bus services, railways, gas and electricity utilities have all provided huge profit levels and untold wealth for a few, while

prices have risen and quality of provision has declined for the many. In the financial sector the bonus culture led to hugely inflated salaries, share options, incentives and platinum pensions for the insiders; while savers and pensionable employees were out in the cold. It is a massive irony that the only solution to the chaos caused by the bankers' selfish avarice is the wholesale bailing out of the financial institutions with public money. As another trade union leader commented wryly: 'They want to privatise profits, but nationalise debt'".

In the latter part of his speech, Mr Drever moved on to describe some of his experiences in his year of EIS Presidential office: "One of the delightful aspects of this job was being able to stravaig the length and breadth of the country, getting into schools and classrooms. I've had the good luck to be in Whalsay and Dumfries; South Uist and Aberdeen – and most places in between; and I was struck everywhere I went by the everyday professionalism of the teachers I met. I say this with no sense of cliché, but rather in recognition of practitioners, skilled in their trade, and committed to the children and young people in their care. I think these are probably the defining features of teachers wherever they practise; but the circumstances in which they work can be dramatically different from ours, here in Scotland," said Mr Drever.

He added, "I travelled to Venezuela and Colombia earlier this year: my trip to these two countries was back to back, but the purposes of the visits were quite different. Venezuela is a country in ferment: under the government of Hugo Chavez, the huge wealth generated by its massive oil resources concentrated on the Caribbean coast is being channelled to the poorest sections of society. Education and health have been the main recipients of the increased investment; and the lives of millions of shanty town dwellers are being transformed. It seems as if the whole country is going to school: everyone I met spoke of the importance of education in empowering learners of all ages. The contrasts I witnessed in Colombia could not have been starker."

Mr Drever explained, "Colombia is a country living in fear: fear of the civil war being fought between the government of Alvaro Uribe and the guerrilla forces of the FARC; fear of the immense power of the narcobusinesses that generate huge illegal wealth; and fear of the army and the right wing paramilitary units that terrorise much of the population and threaten all legitimate parties and social groups that oppose the government. The threat of

violence was palpable everywhere we travelled, and in fact we were accompanied throughout by armed bodyguards provided by the democratic opposition.”

“Colombia is the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists. There have been 2,650 trade unionists murdered, and 232 assassination attempts, in addition to the 193 who have disappeared without trace and are feared dead. Currently there are over 580 trade unionists held in arbitrary detention without trial. The brutal reality of this was brought home to us during our visit when we got word that the president of the teachers’ union in the province of Cordoba had been murdered: gunmen shot him six times, three times in the head, in front of his home. His daughter was seriously injured also in the attack. He was the fourth teachers’ leader to be assassinated this year.”

“During our visit, we took testimonials from victims of human and labour rights abuses, a harrowing experience as we listened to accounts of sons, brothers and fathers tortured, disappeared and murdered with no one brought to justice for these crimes. The failure to pursue and prosecute those responsible has multiplied the anguish of the bereaved families,” said Mr Drever.

He added, “It was a privilege, but not a pleasure, to visit Colombia and witness the daily courage of fellow trade unionists carrying out their work under such dangerous conditions. It is salutary to note that beyond their priority demand: the democratic right to organise collectively in unions, without fear of retribution; their concerns are similar to their fellow union members in this country – security of employment; adequate wage and salary levels; health and safety at work; negotiated working conditions on the job. They are the bread and butter issues that engage trade unionists wherever they organise. Taken alongside our concern with the structure and content of the education process, the ‘civilising agency’ I spoke of earlier, these are the central issues for all of us here, and for our colleagues in the schools and colleges of Scotland. They are the motive force for us as EIS activists.”

**(ENDS)**

For further information, please contact Brian Cooper on 0131 225 6244 or 07974 715101

**A copy of the full text of Mr Drever’s speech is attached for your information.**

## **President's address, 2009 AGM Perth**

### **PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

It would have needed shrewd foresight to have predicted the events that have convulsed the economic and political world over the past year as the most recent free market bubble – property speculation – burst so spectacularly. The UK origins of this financial meltdown were found in the election of Margaret Thatcher's government thirty years ago – I attended my first EIS AGM in Ayr Town Hall a month after that election. In the three decades since then, every government of whatever hue, has championed the free market: deregulation of financial controls, unfettered movement of capital, and the privatisation of many public utilities and essential services. Alongside this radical economic programme came a whole new vocabulary to justify it – freedom and flexibility were paramount and Enterprise became one of our chief virtues (it even found its way into our school curricula, but was much subverted to give it an educative ethos); and a central mantra of the new economics was Private Good, Public Bad.

Despite the hard sell and the spin, the reality of course has been quite different: privatised bus services, railways, gas and electricity utilities have all provided huge profit levels and untold wealth for a few, while prices have risen and quality of provision has declined for the many. In the financial sector the bonus culture led to hugely inflated salaries, share options, incentives and platinum pensions for the insiders; while savers and pensionable employees were out in the cold. It is a massive irony that the only solution to the chaos caused by the bankers selfish avarice is the wholesale bailing out of the financial institutions with public money. As another trade union leader commented wryly: "They want to privatise profits, but nationalise debt".

In early October last year I had the opportunity to chair a lecture delivered by Professor Tom Devine. It was held in Dynamic Earth, sponsored by EIS, introduced by Fiona Hyslop, Cabinet Secretary for Education, and was very well attended. Professor Devine took as his title, "For Better or for Worse? Scotland transformed 1980 – 2008". His lecture in effect summarised much of what he had discoursed on at greater length in the final chapter of his best selling history of Scotland, *The Scottish Nation 1700 – 2000*. He made reference to the financial firestorm that had just engulfed the Scottish banks. In particular he reflected on the importance of the state, which will be "one of the great sheet anchors of Scotland, giving stability of employment and spending power" within the continuing maelstrom of world financial markets. He went on to link this basic economic importance of the public sector with what he called its "brain intensive" value as expressed in comprehensive schools and an extensive Further and Higher education system.

In this period of economic recession, we need to speak up loudly and articulately in defence of our public services. We need to state unequivocally that a society's maturity and degree of civilization is measured by the extent to which it nurtures its children, protects its vulnerable members, and cares for its elderly. All the evidence of our recent past shows that this can best – indeed can only – be done by a fully funded, accountable, public sector. Education, as delivered by our schools and colleges, must be at the heart of that public sector. It is a truism that education has a part to play in achieving a fairer and more equitable society, and certainly there is sound economic sense in having a well educated workforce. However in a world whose staples are wealth, celebrity and glamour,

and where role models are defined by their 'vaulting ambition' and selfish greed, there is a crucial civilizing role for schools and colleges. In educating the whole person – cognitively, socially, emotionally, and in an atmosphere of cooperation and shared learning – we will be equipping our children and young people with the ethical, intellectual and practical life skills that will allow them to “work as if they live in the early days of a better nation”.

One of the delightful aspects of this job was being able to stravaig the length and breadth of the country, getting into schools and classrooms. I've had the good luck to be in Whalsay and Dumfries; South Uist and Aberdeen – and most places in between; and I was struck everywhere I went by the everyday professionalism of the teachers I met. I say this with no sense of cliché, but rather in recognition of practitioners, skilled in their trade, and committed to the children and young people in their care. I think these are probably the defining features of teachers wherever they practise; but the circumstances in which they work can be dramatically different from ours, here in Scotland.

I travelled to Venezuela and Colombia earlier this year: my trip to these two countries was back to back, but the purposes of the visits were quite different. I was accompanied in Venezuela by my fellow President of the National Union of Teachers in England and Wales, Bill Greenshields, and we met with the teacher and lecturer unions and Government ministers responsible for education. Venezuela is a country in ferment: under the government of Hugo Chavez, the huge wealth generated by its massive oil resources concentrated on the Caribbean coast is being channelled to the poorest sections of society. Education and health have been the main recipients of the increased investment; and the lives of millions of shanty town dwellers are being transformed. It seems as if the whole country is going to school: everyone I met spoke of the importance of education in empowering learners of all ages. Thousands of new schools have been built for school pupils and three ambitious programmes are providing basic literacy, high school education and higher education for adults – mostly urban poor and the rural indigenous people – who previously had basic schooling, or none at all. We visited a secondary school in one of the poorest districts of Caracas. The headteacher, a formidable woman who has taught there for twenty five years, told us how she used to fear for the children's health when they would hunt and kill diseased city pigeons in the playground to provide food for their families, but would not attend the school. Now all her pupils are given two hot meals each day and pupil attendance has quadrupled in ten years. Venezuela has received expert health and educational support from its Caribbean neighbour Cuba, this year celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of its revolution, in exchange for much needed oil. The poorest sections of Venezuelan society are experiencing the transformative power of education, and like their Cuban neighbours are beginning to see that another world is indeed possible.

The contrasts I witnessed in Colombia could not have been starker. On leaving Venezuela I travelled to Bogota, Colombia's capital, to join a delegation investigating trade union and human rights abuses in that country. The visit had been organised by Justice for Colombia, a UK based solidarity organisation to which EIS is affiliated, and comprised trade union leaders and lawyers from the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States, and MPs from the Westminster parliament. Colombia is a country living in fear: fear of the civil war being fought between the government of Alvaro Uribe and the guerrilla forces of the FARC; fear of the immense power of the narcobusinesses that generate huge illegal wealth; and fear of the army and the right wing paramilitary units that terrorise much of the

population and threaten all legitimate parties and social groups that oppose the government. The threat of violence was palpable everywhere we travelled, and in fact we were accompanied throughout by armed bodyguards provided by the democratic opposition.

Colombia is the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists. There have been 2,650 trade unionists murdered, and 232 assassination attempts, in addition to the 193 who have disappeared without trace and are feared dead. Currently there are over 580 trade unionists held in arbitrary detention without trial. The brutal reality of this was brought home to us during our visit when we got word on the Saturday evening of our visit that the president of the teachers' union in the province of Cordoba had been murdered: gunmen shot him six times, three times in the head, in front of his home. His daughter was seriously injured also in the attack. He was the fourth teachers' leader to be assassinated this year. Most of the killings are attributed to the rightwing paramilitary groups that operate with absolute impunity and are closely linked to Uribe's government. The teachers' organisation, FECODE, is the largest and best organised of the Colombian trade union, and as such is the target of brutal repression. This suppression of the trade unions is closely linked to a neoliberal agenda: where multinational companies wish to invest in or acquire Colombian companies they specify that trade union organisation be liquidated before purchase.

During our visit, we took testimonials from victims of human and labour rights abuses, a harrowing experience as we listened to accounts of sons, brothers and fathers tortured, disappeared and murdered with no one brought to justice for these crimes. The failure to pursue and prosecute those responsible has multiplied the anguish of the bereaved families. One of our most moving experiences was a visit to Buen Pastor women's prison in Bogota where we met with women prisoners in the political wing, most of whom have been held for up to three years without charge. One of them, a headteacher of five rural school units had been arrested for working as a teacher within a province controlled by the FARC guerrillas. These women were living under primitive conditions, without recourse to justice, and yet they displayed a calm courage that was remarkable. Almost all of them were mothers whose children were being looked after by their extended family.

We also visited Martin Sandoval, the leader of the Permanent Committee for Human Rights, Colombia's largest human rights group. He had been held in prison for six months without trial in Arauca province, a war region lying close to the Venezuelan border. In our press statement, released at the end of the visit, we called for his release, and that of all other political prisoners held without trial. I am delighted to say that Martin, and 11 other social leaders in the province of Arauca, were released from prison on May 14. Their release is a tribute to the international solidarity, including that of our delegation, which has brought pressure on the Colombian government. In fact, we met with senior members of the government, including a video conference with President Uribe himself. This government engagement with us at the highest level reflects the importance of such delegations to the regime. They are acutely aware of the dangers of negative international publicity to their future plans, which include Free Trade Agreements with the US, Canada and the European Union.

It was a privilege, but not a pleasure, to visit Colombia and witness the daily courage of fellow trade unionists carrying out their work under such dangerous conditions. It is

salutary to note that beyond their priority demand: the democratic right to organise collectively in unions, without fear of retribution; their concerns are similar to their fellow union members in this country – security of employment; adequate wage and salary levels; health and safety at work; negotiated working conditions on the job. They are the bread and butter issues that engage trade unionists wherever they organise. Taken alongside our concern with the structure and content of the education process, the ‘civilising agency’ I spoke of earlier, these are the central issues for all of us here, and for our colleagues in the schools and colleges of Scotland. They are the motive force for us as EIS activists.

My first school was Queens Park Secondary in Toryglen, Glasgow. The first EIS publication I saw was the current edition of the SEJ – I think it was weekly then – lying on the staffroom table. It had a big picture of Hugh MacDiarmid on the front cover – he was Scotland’s finest poet of the time (some say the finest since Burns) – a huge, irascible and controversial presence who fought to drag Scottish culture out of the parochial, pawkiness in which it languished, and to force it into the radical European traditions of the Twentieth Century. The SEJ was republishing that month – it was August 1976 – an earlier book of MacDiarmid’s essays called Contemporary Scottish Studies. This book comprised a series of weekly essays on eminent Scotsmen and women (although mostly men) that MacDiarmid had written for the SEJ in 1926. At that time it had caused an enormous rummy in the cultural and political establishment as the author incisively disparaged the Great and Good of Scottish society. The weekly essays must have been like depth charges falling into the placid waters of Scottish culture.

I bought the republished book of essays – in fact I later acquired a first edition of the original, which cost rather more – and I became the school EIS rep three weeks later. I recognised at that time, and have had it reinforced by experience since then, that education has a central importance in Scottish civil life – in the transmission of knowledge and cultural values, as I suggested earlier – and that EIS has a key role in this process. We are the largest representative, democratic body in Scottish society, and are the authoritative voice of the teaching profession. In our consideration of what I termed the bread and butter issues, and the educational issues, as well as our international concerns, we will have an audience well beyond the confines of this hall. I look forward to the coming debates and resolutions that will chart our path forward.

David Drever