

Privilege flexes its muscles

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Fee-charging schools exercise media grip – **Gerry Jeffers**

Reaction to Minister Alan Kelly's suggestion on RTÉ television's 'The Week in Politics' (Oct 7th) offers an instructive case-study of how powerful interests campaign to preserve the status quo. Kelly had suggested that the state's funding of fee-charging schools is a luxury rather than a necessity and that it "must come to an end".

Next morning, on RTÉ Radio 1's 'Morning Ireland', Christopher Woods, Principal of Wesley College, Dublin began shaping the case for the defence of approximately €95 million annually that finds its way to schools that charge fees.

Woods' main argument was that Wesley College (a Methodist foundation) caters for Protestant children from a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds. Specifically, he cited three reasons for fees: boarding (about 100 of the 900 pupils are boarders); co-education; and, the "extraordinary" subject range. Asked about the possibility of charging fees for boarding only, Woods contended that "the whole system would collapse". He was not challenged on how similar-sized schools that don't charge fees cater for co-education or offer comprehensive subject choices. Woods described Kelly's economic argument as "utterly flawed" and asserted that the majority of fee-charging schools would close if the subsidy was withdrawn.

Woods then voiced an argument that was to become a common thread in subsequent debates: parents who send their children to these schools are not elitist or privileged. He referred to significant numbers who are "on the edge". He also called on Fine Gael backbenchers to speak out.

RTÉ's Brian Dowling reminded listeners of the background to this discussion: the audit conducted by the Department of Education and Skills of how fee-charging schools spend the money they receive.

That afternoon, on RTÉ's 'Drivetime', Labour TD Aodhán Ó Riordáin spoke of fee-charging schools as being about exclusion and of the need to scale back their funding over a number of years. He argued that realistically, "you can't withdraw subvention completely overnight". He suggested a gradual increase in the pupil-teacher ratio (currently 21:1 in fee charging schools, 19:1 in other schools and 18.25:1 in those designated as DEIS schools). O Riordáin also pointed out many schools that don't charge fees have to deal with the challenges posed by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, those from the Traveller community, emigrant children, those with learning difficulties and those with behavioural issues "that your average fee-paying school don't deal with". Presenter Mary Wilson challenged him on this, stating that some in the sector would "argue the toss" with him. Ó Riordáin replied by comparing a school with maybe 10% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds to one with 100%.

The Labour TD ended by returning to the fairness argument, suggesting that fee-charging schools should re-assess their situation, adding how they would be welcomed into the state system.

Later in the same programme, Mary Wilson interviewed Ken Whyte, Principal of Presentation College, Cork. He pushed the line of middle-income parents who want the best for their children – so much so that they are willing to pay after-tax income on school fees – as the ones who were under siege in this debate. He threw in some emotive phrases like “rather than blowing money on holidays”, “parents looking for a Catholic ethos” (even though the majority of school in the state are Catholic and non-fee charging), “anti-denominational – let’s all get in the secular system together” and “our school is the same as any other school”. In Whyte’s opinion, the strongest argument for the maintenance of fee-charging schools was “the equality argument”, as “all our children should be treated equally”: his is an unorthodox equality.

That night, ‘The Frontline’ on RTÉ television took up the issue with a studio audience, Labour TD Derek Nolan and Principal of Dublin’s Belvedere College, Gerry Foley. Nolan spoke of the educational segregation associated with fee-charging schools. Foley mentioned that “these schools” only represent about 6% of all schools, “the vast majority” serving religious minorities. He then asserted that many “automatically presume all these people are wealthy, they can well afford it”. Foley also invoked choice for parents and competition – presumably rather than co-operation – between schools. His arguments resonated with the cases put by Woods and Whyte.

Foley contended that withdrawing support for the 55 fee-charging schools would lead to “half a dozen elite schools”. He was not asked whether he thought this would make for a better or worse situation than the present reality.

The following morning, an opinion piece in the Irish Examiner described Alan Kelly’s comments as: “... class-war bluster straight out of the Arthur Scargill handbook of envy as policy”. It continued: “Putting aside altogether the important role private schools play in supporting minority religions, the idea that bankrupting these schools would save the state money is laughable. Where would these students go but to a state school, putting further pressure on an already splitting-at-the-seams system?” Again, the inaccurately-used phrase “state school” purports to deny the reality that the majority of schools in Ireland are private, Catholic and non-fee charging. Furthermore, many community schools and community colleges are imaginative blends of the best traditions from vocational and voluntary schools.

The next day’s ‘Morning Ireland’ saw Fine Gael’s Mary Mitchell O’Connor and Labour’s Robert Dowds revisit the issue. The Fine Gael TD focused on the cost to the state if it was to “dismantle the system of fee-charging schools”. She stated that her concern was parents – “I’m not here as a spokesperson for schools”. Parents, she said “are really pushed, can’t pay any more”.

Robert Dowds’s contention was that schools should be the great leveller in society. He pointed to schools with a Protestant ethos that do not charge fees, including Mount Temple and Newpark in Dublin, Ashton in Cork and Raphoe in Donegal. He also cited the recent decision by Wilson’s Hospital in Westmeath to join the ‘free education’ scheme. Mention of Newpark prompted Mitchell O’Connor to note that this school (in her constituency) is over-

subscribed and that “ordinary parents” who can’t get their children into “ordinary secondary schools” are “forced to use fee-charging schools”!

On the same day, in the Topical Issue Debate in Dáil Éireann, Fine Gael TD Charles Flanagan contended that “Many fee-charging schools are being kept open by donations, trusts, legacies and by little cost to the taxpayer”. He focused in particular on fee-charging Protestant schools and spoke of the need to “cherish the plurality of educational expression”. His colleague Eoghan Murphy TD, focused on the budgetary context of the debate and asserted that “while a €100 million subvention is paid to fee-paying schools, it is a saving to the state to the tune of €3 million, as it is €3,500 cheaper for it to have a child taught in a fee-paying school”. He wished apparently un-ideologically to shift the focus to payment increments for teachers as well as for yard-duty.

Replying, the Minister, Ruairí Quinn, TD, took the opportunity to remind his audience of present pupil-teacher ratios and of his decision, announced in the previous budget, to conduct an “analysis of tuition-fee income available to schools in the sector and its utilisation. This analysis will inform future policy on the potential extent and nature of Exchequer investment, including funding for teacher posts in the fee-charging sector”.

On Wednesday, the Irish Examiner carried a story with the headline “Fee-paying schools refuse to co-operate with review”. Juno McEntee reported that the paper understood that “a number” of the 55 schools “have refused to co-operate with the departmental review”. Meanwhile, on the same day, the *Irish Independent* carried a piece by Aodhán Ó Riordáin. “Private schools are a means of exclusion. People are segregated on the ability of their parents to pay fees. Social barriers are reinforced, with wealthy families enjoying the benefits of smaller class sizes. Those who attend private schools are far more likely to go on to third level and work in high-end jobs with higher wages.

Whether it costs more or less money is irrelevant. This is about cherishing all our children of the nation equally as that oft-quoted line of the 1916 Proclamation goes”, he wrote. As he had asserted on the radio that week: “Mainstream schools empower children of all backgrounds; regardless of ethnicity, income background, special educational needs or learning difficulty. These are surely the schools that deserve the state’s support first and foremost”.

The *Irish Independent* also reported on October 10th that “three Protestant schools have approached the Department of Education about changing their fee-paying status”. This story, by Katherine Donnelly, followed the decision by Wilson’s Hospital to stop charging tuition fees. Adrian Oughton, Principal, was quoted as saying “We are no worse off financially and we are better off in terms of pupil-teacher ratio”. There was no mention of any schools under Catholic trusteeship seeking to join the ‘free education’ scheme, though this is a contested issue within a number of religious congregations.

Aspects of the debate surfaced in various other media outlets. For example, The Sunday Independent had Éilis O’Hanlon claiming that “attack on fee paying schools is just symbolism”, while the headline over Elaine Byrne’s piece was: “It’s class warfare they want, not private education cuts”. The paper also carried an article that listed the schools attended by Ministers’ children. The *Irish Times* letters page also kept the issue alive with John Thompson (October 15) contending that the €100 million subsidy “represents an annual levy

of roughly €60 on each and every one of the 1.7 million workers, and reduced the cost of private education from around €25,000 to between €4,000 and €8,000”. He contended that media commentators are beneficiaries of this “wonderful cash gift as evidenced by their aggressive pro-subsidy stance”.

The fee-charging schools debate is a complex, multi-faceted one. Traditions, religious ethos, decisions made by schools in the late 1960s and enrolment policies all play their part. So too does our understanding of inequalities, their causes and remedies. Our school system is a major arm of national social policy. The responses to Alan Kelly’s comments show the fee-charging schools’ lobby to be a powerful one, capable of scattergun argument and neat distinctions. Many educationalists, concerned about equality, diversity and disadvantage, marvel at the media’s appetite for this story and their neglect of many other school-related issues. Perhaps that in itself is a key lesson: this small but influential sector does have a distorting effect on Irish life. In conversations with those working in fee-charging schools I am frequently struck by how much “they don’t get it”, that the flipside of educational disadvantage is educational privilege, that intentionally or otherwise, segregated, elitist schooling almost inevitably reinforces wider social attitudes of segregation and elitism. In most cases, their knowledge of educational disadvantage is incomplete, at times a caricature. Imagine if all schools were part of one taxpayer-funded ‘free education’ system, how different our educational debates would be. Current advocates of privilege would come to realise just how ‘splitting-at-the-seams’ the school system actually is. More importantly, parents of children attending such schools, who are both cosseted from the effects of shoestring economics in schools and often in the most influential positions in our society, might wake up to the whole system’s fragility and see the value of schooling in promoting inclusion and social justice.

Dr Gerry Jeffers lectures in Education (Innovation and Development in Schools) at National University of Ireland Maynooth and formerly taught at Firhouse Community College, Dublin 24