RE-THINKING SCHOOL PATRONAGE:
THE FORUM AND ITS OUTCOMES

Professor John Coolahan

I would also like to express my heartfelt congratulations to the Jes on celebrating 150 years of service. It really is a tremendous occasion in that regard and I would like to thank the school community and the previous school communities for the marvellous work they have done for generations of young people who have gone through their hands. I would also like to thank the organising committee for all the work they have put into getting a conference like this underway. There aren’t many conferences with this theme taking place. I think it is on its own despite the importance of the issue. There haven’t been many public debates on this throughout the country. In the context of the Forum there has been a great deal of debate and that is what I am going to talk about here. Some of you will be more familiar with the Forum report than others. I ask those of you who are very familiar with it to forgive me if I go over some of the material and those of you who are not so familiar, please forgive me if I am not going into detail, but we can clarify with questions afterwards things that I might have glossed over. Obviously, I cannot cover the whole Forum report in this short time but I will try to cover what is relevant and pertinent here today.

When you chose your theme Re-thinking Education I think you highlighted something worth remembering. I think in recent times, over the last fifteen or twenty years, what is very distinctive about Ireland is the amount of reflection on education that has been ongoing. We sometimes forget this and the consultative character of that reflection and the engagement of the people in it, which is a very healthy sign of education and democracy. I shall just try to remind you of some of that. There was the Green paper in 1992 which gave rise to a wide range of debate in which, I am sure many of you were involved. Then we had the National Education Convention in Dublin Castle where we had forty two organisations present for a fortnight discussing all aspects of education. That led to the White Paper in 1995 on the general education system. Then in 1996 when we had the presidency of the EU we designed a strategy for life-long learning which was very influential in Europe. Following
that we had the Green Paper on adult education which gave rise to a huge nationwide debate followed by the White Paper on adult education. We had the National Forum on Childhood Education in 1998 which led to a White Paper on early childhood in 1999. So, within a space of a decade or less we had two Green papers and three White papers covering the whole spectrum of education from the cradle to the grave in modern Ireland. Needless to say, nothing like that had ever happened before. Something else arose which never happened before either. One of the distinguishing features of Irish education, unfortunately, was the limited legislation there was for education. Apart from the Vocational Education Act of 1930 there was scarcely any significant educational information until now. But following this debate and rethinking we had a raft of educational legislation – about eight educational Acts including the University Act and the Education Act of 97/98 and a whole range of others. So you have a very great change that occurred and all that took a lot of time and effort and the involvement of people but I think we shouldn’t forget how lively the issue has been. Likewise, the Department of Education and Science has been restructured in many, many ways. A range of secondary agencies was set up to take on a variety of duties, such as the Secondary Education Committee and a host of others and, in addition, the NCCA got statutory status. Further, The Teaching Council was established on a statutory basis, and both of these are very much consultative agencies as well. So you are part of that reflection and in tune with that kind of rethinking. The questions being discussed here today were raised at the Convention and in our report of 1994. It was already clear, and the Department accepted at the time, that there needed to be a more diverse provision for schooling in the changing society and in our report – you can see it there – I don’t have to read it through for you, we pointed out that we needed to take a grip on this. We recommended that the Department should establish a group to provide guidelines and to investigate and explore the issues in question so that we would restructure the system for the needs of the changing and the diverse society. The White paper of 1995 accepted that recommendation without any ambiguity and said that such a working group would be convened in the near future. Well, the near future was 16 years later! While we do a lot of rethinking we are not always quite as adept or as skilled in our implementation!
In any case the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, the consultative process launched by Minister Quinn in April 2011, followed the lines of the earlier Convention. Between April and the end of June we received two hundred and fifteen written submissions which showed the wide range of interest in all these issues. Then in late June we had three open days with the key stakeholders. Questions and discussions based on the submissions were uploaded on to a web-page so people who couldn’t be present could participate and engage. This was followed by consultation with other people on issues that had arisen, and a review of the literature on this whole theme at home and abroad with ongoing analysis between June and November. During that period we had very interesting discussions, facilitated by the Ombudsman for children, with school children on their rights and general views on education. Then on the 17th November we had a de-briefing session, sharing our reflections at that stage and inviting people to respond to these reflections. On this occasion we received thirty one written submissions within a few weeks. Based on all the foregoing consultation, analysis and reflection our report was finalized in January 2012. I think I should emphasise again the very democratic, consultative nature of the process.

I think I would like to talk about the context of this project and I would like to highlight some of issues involved. While many parents are not very concerned about school patronage, the issue itself is often a very complex and very contentious issue, not just in Irish society but in almost any society. It’s not just an Irish type issue. The control and the management of patronage of schooling is complex in most societies and of course it is an issue that, in Ireland, is shaped by historical, religious and political considerations at different stages, just as in other countries. There is always an underlay of constitutional and legal provisions to be taken into account. Of course, there are many diverging viewpoints and we found that to be very clearly the case in Ireland. Also it is an issue that, as was pointed out this morning, is open to changing social circumstances and in a good society it needs to be kept open and evolve and change and not to be copper-fastened for generations. Needless to say, it is a sensitive type of issue involving senses of identity, loyalty and tradition. We have all been shaped by values and traditions etc. and we have to respect those and the key thing is not to be trapped by them, to respect them and question them if necessary.
We found out very quickly that it was an issue about which the public and parents were not always well informed. They knew very little about the background context etc. and we found that an analysis intended to lead to future developments needed a shared understanding of how the existing structure had developed. So, we set out in the first section of the report a concise and fair analysis of the historical background, the origin of the setting up of the National School system in 1831, what the objectives were, and how the system evolved through the 19th century up to Independence in 1922. Post-independence policy did not change much for a long time but it did change a great deal in the 60’s and 70’s and not necessarily in the spirit that was helpful for the long term development of it. Our report lays out the relevant facts and figures.

We then look at the recent past, the 1990’s and up to the present, e.g. the Education Convention, the various policy papers, the White Papers and so on which by and large ignored the issue of patronage. The Constitution Review Committee in 1996 did not ignore it and said it should be attended to by way of legislation. The Education Act (1998) did not deal substantially with this issue. We also looked at international prospective on this matter. We are, as you know, part of a global network of linkages with the UN and the EU and have obligations under various conventions to which we have signed up, like the Convention of Human Rights, the Convention of Civil and Political Rights, The Convention of the Rights of the Child, all of which have relevance to our particular provision of schooling. We drew attention to reports from some of these bodies – Unsad and others, in March and October last year where these bodies, reviewing the situation in Ireland, were very critical of our system, stating that we had not sufficient diversity to answer to the needs of our citizens in the current situation. They more or less indicated to the Government that it needed to do something about it.

The Government, however, was already beginning to take the matter seriously. There was also other thinking taking place in the post 9/11 era and the extraordinary aspects of, should we say fundamentalism, across the world in the various religions. Many thinking people concluded that, in a globalised world, we needed to look at this whole issue in a different way altogether. There was so much prejudice, lack of understanding, lack of awareness of different religions and different belief systems that we could no longer
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continue in blissful ignorance which, quite frankly, many people had done. Having
highlighted that we looked at the evolving situation in the last couple of years and there was
quite a good bit happening. There were changing attitudes and the debate was picking up.
The School Accommodation Committee, in particular, set up by the Department, had very
interesting things to say about it as had the Irish Human Rights Commission Report which
was highly critical of the existing situation. Against that background the conclusion was that
the status quo was no longer an option.

We decided that the most valuable thing to do was to assess the current state of
relevant conditions, to try to establish the facts of the situation throughout the country;
what is the existing situation in terms of numbers of schools, types of schools, participation
of schools, enrolments and so on. We also needed to track population patterns in terms of
numbers and composition to create a population profile of contemporary Ireland, and do a
survey of research findings in terms of changing attitudes of the population towards religion
and schooling provision. When we got down to do that we found that there were eleven
studies of some standing from which we could draw which analysed contemporary
perspectives of Irish citizens on religion, schooling, religion in schools, their own practice
etc. The report does not claim that it is exhaustive or definitive but what we do say is that
there is more than enough there to give indications of our conclusion that there was a
mismatch between the inherited provision and contemporary needs and all those facts are
there for anybody to read so that both from the historical perspective and current analysis
we had a problem to consider. Some facts that emerged are that 96% of the schools were
under denominational control and patronage, that we have had an increasing young
population emerging, that it was a much more multi-cultural population moving towards a
multi-cultural type society which the Government wished. There were more varied belief
systems and an increasing majority of non-believers in the population. In the recent census
figures which you saw there were about two hundred and seventy five thousand citizens
who put themselves down as having no religion. It is also clear that there are changing
parental attitudes towards religious education as well as changing attitudes towards
religious practices in contemporary Ireland. We also were aware that there was pressure
from our varied forms of patronage. Some of the new patronage bodies like Educate
Together and Foras Patrunachta said that they had great demand for new schools and that this needed to be attended to.

The foregoing outline brings us to part of your sub-theme, State and Church sharing renewal. Clearly, Irish society can treat this problem in different ways. We could adopt an approach which would lead to a great deal of social conflict and social distress at local level. We could let it drift as we had been doing. On the other hand the State and Churches and people could take the issue seriously. Obviously there was a legal obligation on the State in accordance with its own constitution and otherwise and by its international obligations to provide primary education for all its citizens. We also believe that there is a moral obligation on all stakeholders, particularly the patronage bodies, to cooperate and facilitate this process. We see it as an evolving process. It has already begun and is evolving, and we particularly drew attention to Archbishop Martin’s intervention and his address is well worth listening to as also is Archbishop Jackson’s. Archbishop Martin, in 2007, referred to this matter and made it quite clear that he was not very happy with the situation of being patron of all these schools, some of which were nominally Catholic, some of which were varied; and with reference to some of these schools he maintained that he could see value in providing for the increasing diversity of Irish citizens and that he would cooperate with that process. Then the State began to introduce initiatives in pilot schools: the VEC established its community national schools as pilots. There are five pilots still operating. The State also drew up new guidelines on patronage of new schools; there would be new criteria for patrons which they would set out and with which old and new patrons would have to comply. That was a very positive initiative and I pay tribute to the Civil Service and the Department. In many instances they have been very proactive with regard to these trends.

A discussion paper on school enrolment was issued by the Department for future school enrolment and also the Department accepted from the Forum, for the first time ever, that if there was a demand for them from sufficient parents they would give State support for non-denominational or secular schools. This had never been the case until last year. It depends of course on whether there is sufficient demand, but if there is, the State has gone on record that they will provide State support for those as well as for denominational schools. In the old days the State did not recognise the school unless religion was a central
dimension of it. Also, there was new thinking about joint-campus arrangements for new buildings and what might be the best utilisation of resources. So there was quite a bit of new thinking emerging here. As I say, it is an evolving process. From our point of view then, for the purpose of my short talk today, there were three target type schools to be considered. One was the provision of diversity in new schools in an area where there was a rising population and again the Ministry and the Department have been very alert on this and following the report on school accommodation last year they moved on it. Last year they also set out the criteria for the new schools and they advised patrons on how they made decisions on patronage in new schools. There is no great problem there because they will be diverse. The future schools will be diverse and the Catholic Church has not sought patronage of the new schools, bearing in mind the general situation. And that’s fine. Thanks be to God we have a rising young population for whom we want to provide schools and they will be provided in a more diverse framework that was previously the case.

The second set of circumstances was different. This was concerned with areas where there was a stable population, where school supply was adequate and there was no justification for further building. If, however, there was parental demand for another type of school patronage than that which existed, say in a town where there were five or six schools all under a certain denominational control – could this be changed?

The third consideration centred on a “stand alone school”, i.e. a single school serving an area with an increasingly diverse population. How was the diversity of needs to be catered for since the option of another school would not be available? Further to this was the question of Irish medium schools. I am not discussing those today, not because it is not an important issue, but simply because of the nature of the theme of this Conference. However, the report does deal with this issue.

As regards category two, places where there are stable populations, was it realistic to hope that a greater diversity of school patronage might be nurtured? As it happened, in response to a request from the Catholic Church the Department itself had identified forty seven such areas in August 2010 before the Convention was set up, but nothing was done about it at that time. In any case they identified these as areas where, a priori, there seemed to be the situation whereby there was a cluster of schools and there would seem to
be a demand for another one and they might examine those as to which school might be the
divested from the existing patronage to the new patronage body. So we thought that, in
terms of increasing momentum the best thing to do would be to build on that rather than
start again, and to use those findings as the first cycle. We said it would be very unwise to
adopt an initiative leading to a large upheaval, that it was best to proceed in a kind of
gradual, incremental way, dealing with these forty seven areas throughout the country.
There are about, as you know, three thousand two hundred primary schools and the task
would be to see if less than fifty schools in those areas might be divested. This beginning
would help to develop an understanding of difficulties that might arise and help to shape
the process of divestment. We considered that the most efficient way of proceeding would
be to canvass the views of existing and prospective parents of school-going and pre-school
children in the areas in question. I will come back to that in a few moments. We also
considered that there were some areas where an existing demand had been recognized and
registered and that progress could be made in those areas rather than delaying the process
until all areas had been surveyed. In this context it should be emphasized that not just
anybody is entitled to establish a school in accordance with their own wishes. Prospective
patrons must satisfy criteria set out by the state, including a statement of ethos. A
fundamentalist group, for example, of a type unsuited to a democratic state would not fulfil
the requirements which are already in place. In this regard there should be a register of all
actual or potential patrons established which would focus on the new criteria.

Stage 2 would proceed in the light of response by parents. The issues would be
looked at by the patrons and discussed with local communities where they might initiate the
necessary adjustments and make a school available for another patron body. I’m not
suggesting that it does not have its difficulties. Of course it has, and we should have further
discussion about the possible difficulties that might arise. Nevertheless, it seems the
common sense thing to do.

At Stage 3 patrons would make proposals to the Ministry and the Minister would
decide eventually as to which patron body he would give one of the existing schools and the
time scale and other conditions that would be involved. As these are complex issues we also
recommended that it would be desirable to have a small, independent advisory body to act
as a kind of public check on things and to ensure that the process was carried through with transparent probity.

The experience gained from this phase should be quickly absorbed and taken to other urban and rural areas where such attention was needed. This would be proceeding in an incremental manner, interacting with the populations, eliciting their views and needs and responding appropriately over time.

Of particular concern was the situation regarding stand-alone schools where there would not be a new school specifically designated for a new patron, but where there were clusters of people of different religious belief systems. Since the 1830’s right through, including the Education Act of 1998, provision has been made for pupils to opt out of religious instruction in a State supported school. That principle has been upheld from the very start. But the problem was, apart from that given by the Principal, there was very little attention paid to it, in the sense that schools were given very little guidance, very little support, very little exemplars on how to accommodate this situation. Some schools devised fairly intelligent practice, some schools did not. Some schools thought they did but when you talked to the parents and pupils in question who were non-believers they were very unhappy with the nature of what was provided. What struck me, particularly, was that, even in the Education Act, there is a lot laid down as regards what the school Boards of Management might do to monitor the Principal, but no guidelines of any kind as regards this problem. So we were clear that there needed to be a protocol established, giving guidelines and suggestions of good practice. We are not saying that we had all the wisdom but this needed to be worked at and the schools would translate that protocol into action in their own circumstances and using their best wisdom. We also said that the Boards of Management of schools should reflect the diversity of the community if at all possible and that where whole school evaluation was being introduced, which is of course a national policy, that diversity within the school would also be noted by the inspectorate. Also, when the self-evaluation that was mentioned this morning is being bedded down in schools, which I think is a very progressive movement as it gets a cultural change underway, that such evaluation should take account of this issue of internal diversity. But there also need to be exemplars of how to evaluate school ethos and I was very pleased this morning by the
attention that was paid to ethos by Archbishop Jackson. If you look back at the Convention report (1994) you will see a section there that deals with school ethos and I think that what we were saying there was very close to what he was saying this morning. Ethos is an organic, living thing in a school community. It is not something that you hand down and that people are forced into, and it was very interesting to learn, while we were at work, that many of the patron bodies were themselves already devising school ethos statements to help support the management, and we endorsed that. We also said that Boards of Management should support the rights of parents and children as regards denominational religious education; the vast majority of Irish parents require denominational religious education and of course no-one could interfere or should interfere with that. That is their constitutional right and that has to be defended, but we said that the existing rules for National Schools were very much outdated. The last time they were issued was in 1965 and we were in a very different world then. They needed to be completely reviewed, and we said that as a first step, in the light of what was said at the forum, Rule 68 should be dropped. That did not imply that it would not be re-formulated as some of the others are re-formulated, but as it stands it has become a rather contentious issue. Rule 68, introduced in the 1960’s, says that religion is the most important subject in the school and religion should accordingly vivify and permeate the whole life of the school. Now, if you are talking about a national system whereby you are trying to deal with believers and non-believers you cannot have that as the bedrock statement for the operation of the school. So we said it should be dropped and then become part of the overall review. Some people have latched on to the notion that we were kind of antagonistic and attacking religion. That is not the reality. Denominational religious instruction and faith formation should be taught as a discrete subject. This, of course, is problematical, because of the integrated curriculum; but we teased it out, and whatever they say now, if you look at the report and the quotations we have from some of the partners, they also saw that as a problem. Some of them said “we didn’t see religion as permeating the old curriculum”. It is certainly a contentious issue. We recommended that the opt-out provision should be developed in consultation with parents and children. This is the opt-out provision where children do not have to attend religious instruction in State supported schools.
We also said sacramental preparation was legitimate in denominational schools but that it should not encroach on the time which the State specified for the other subjects. We were being told that in many instances, particularly in first communion classes, there tended to be a significant encroachment on the time of other subjects and we felt that was not proper. We drew attention to that as a fact of life. That does not mean that we were opposed to sacramental preparation. We were not, but it had to be part of the religious instruction programme, not covering the time for English and history and other subjects. We also note that there was a move afoot within Catholic circles, (of course it was the case in the Church of Ireland already), that sacramental preparation would take place more and more in the parish and church and we encouraged that practice. There was, however, a related or resultant problem for those who wished to opt-out of religious instruction classes. Such children could attend school for eight years and receive no education about religion at all, or education about ethics. This, in a democracy, would be unacceptable, bearing in mind the new thinking to which I referred earlier on, that any citizens in a democracy should have an awareness of and a respect for the diversity of religious belief systems of the population. So we suggested that all children – whether they were doing religious instruction as such or not – should have a programme of education about religious beliefs, that is the International phrase used, i.e. ERB, and that ethics should form part of the curriculum for everybody. We do not mean that as just information about, we mean education about, and that it would be developed in such a way that both its contents and its practice would be devised by the NCCA like any other subject, and would be taught in a manner appropriate to the level of children – their imagination, their creativity etc. We do not want it like the old Civics, with bits of information about a variety of things. We want to educate children about the religious and belief systems that exist, the whole idea being some awareness of others and a cultivation and a fostering of tolerance. We also recommended religious celebrations in schools should be inclusive, this being a clear reflection of the views of the young people to whom we spoke. We said that Boards of Management, in schools where different belief systems are represented, should have a policy on religious artefacts and works of art and that the attitude to religion should be inclusive, representative of the belief systems in a particular school. This does not mean
there has to be equal representation. It does not mean for instance, that if there are four or five belief systems in a school – and there are some schools with that – that everybody has to have a large number of religious emblems. It is just simply saying that we are showing sensitivity to and awareness of the beliefs and images of others, that the school is not representing solely a Roman Catholic or Church of Ireland or other point of view. We also noted that in many schools there is plenty of good practice already in place for the celebration of festivities for the different religious denominations, e.g. Ramadan. We considered that this was a very good practice and should be extended to try to ensure that the celebrations are respectful. This would be beneficial in every sense of the word for the children’s general educational development. Now, that is different from religious instruction. ERB is different from religious formation and instruction which, of course, have their own legitimacy.

The foregoing was a presentation of the background to and some of the contents of the report, in the course of which I have tried to tease out some of the issues that arose. I would be glad to take that process further in later dialogue. I would like now to say something about the present status of the report and what has resulted from the deliberations.

The Cabinet, the Minister and staff considered the report and the Minister announced the Government’s response last June at a public meeting of the stakeholders. The Department staff were kind enough to commend the report and accept that it was useful for policy. There was also an acceptance of our proposals for the school divestment, and of our recommendation of a pilot Community National School as being worthwhile in increasing diversity. Further, they accepted our proposals about ERB and ethics and that the NCCA would develop such a programme and that, of course, we would support the NCCA in doing that. They also accepted our proposals for the Irish medium schools. On the other hand, they said they needed to do further re-thinking and have more consultations about our suggestion concerning the protocol for schools generally, but particularly for stand alone schools, i.e. situations where there would not be a new school available to a new patron, where there was a significant proportion of minority of belief systems in the one school which would be predominately denominational. They were going to have further
consultation on that and the idea would be that they were going to have a Government White Paper prepared early in 2013 dealing with the matter.

In summary, you can see that the Government is moving on these matters and I am glad to acknowledge the splendid work of the Assistant Secretary of the Department of Education who is present with us. The Forum report has now been issued to each school with a covering letter. Five pilot schools have been selected from the forty-four that we have been talking about to check out the methodology of the survey and the value of the survey and to see how it is doing. These have already been selected and the process is underway. The information sheets have been prepared for parents of the different denominational partners, what their characteristics are, their perspective on education, their value system. The survey questionnaire is being prepared for parents to garner their opinion. They have been invited to respond to the proposals in our document, and in these five pilot areas they will be expected to respond by 9th November, (2012) which is within a fortnight from now. Those responses will tell us how much people are engaged, how much they are expressing their views. Most of us would hope that, for the benefit of Irish democracy, there is a full engagement. We do not know what the outcomes will be. We will have an open mind about those outcomes but if the outcomes are such that a significant minority of parents record their desire for different varied forms of school, there is a process in place whereby the State may be able to respond to these. It will be interesting to see. It is the first time that Irish parents have ever had a direct opportunity to say what type of school they want in the light of specific information provided to them. So, in many ways it is quite a historic situation that is afoot and it seems to me that we are not doing it in such a bad way. I think it is an incremental process and one of the key conditions here is a foundation for trust. It is a sensitive area and it can also be subject to a lot of distortion by particular agencies if they choose to take such an approach. Essentially, we want to lay a foundation for trust, that this is an open business, things are up front, there is a rationale, there is a purpose and that the purpose is a good purpose: to respond to the rights of citizens and their children. In many ways it seems to be that we are nurturing a mature climate for renewal and when you talk about the theme of your conference – Church and State for Renewal in Education – I think this is an instance of it.
To conclude, I would like to make a personal comment. I have been only a facilitator in the process. My own view, bearing in mind the sensitivities, bearing in mind the traditions, bearing in mind the kind of perplexities involved in this kind of an issue, is that great credit is due to the stakeholders for the way in which they have approached this. I think they have been thoughtful, fair, constructive and they have been listening to each other. That is of central importance in relation to modern Irish education. Through the nineties these elements were in evidence and it was most encouraging, particularly at the Convention. Prior to the convention there were all kinds of divergences but during the Convention people listened to the bona fide arguments of others with different viewpoints and the most extraordinary thing that struck me, and I mentioned it at the final speech of the Convention, was how minds changed. They were open to change and we got an extraordinary amount of consensus which facilitated the production of the White Paper. It was accepted without a murmur. People had engaged, there was a sense of ownership, even though there are sensitive issues involved. People’s belief systems and identity are interwoven in it. However, if we can keep the process going in the way it has been progressing so far, particularly as regards decisions to be made about local schools, it will be a tremendous gaisce (achievement) and, I think, a great tribute to Irish democracy in coping with an issue of sensitivity in a mature way.
RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR COOLAHAN

Dr. Frank Canavan

Ladies and gentlemen, on your behalf and on behalf of the Ignatian Identity Group I would like to thank Professor Coolahan most sincerely for his lucid presentation of the issues involved in the trusteeship of Primary schools and how possible conflicts arising from putative changes might be handled. Without taking from the excellence of the presentation may I say that it was made easier by the quality of the report on which it was based, a report which, of course, Professor Coolahan and his collaborators prepared and completed during the past year. The report, the implementation of which has already begun, provides a transparent context for the deliberations under way from an historical as well as a contemporary perspective. It details the anxiety at home and abroad about the present arrangements for trusteeship, making available the relevant literature and analysis. It also provides a wealth of factual information so that as accurate a picture as possible can be presented of the current state of affairs as regards trusteeship, the increasingly complex demographics and the conflicting needs and demands that must be met. I believe that this report will be central to the changes to be made as regards trusteeship but it will also be of considerable assistance in other aspects of the reform agenda in education.

Arriving at agreement on trusteeship is only one of many challenges facing the educational system and those with responsibility for it. Both the churches and the state have to face up to difficulties on various levels a number of which are implicit in this report, although, because of its focus, they were not dealt with in any detail and I can draw attention to only one or two of them in the short time available.

In the section on terminology (v) there is reference to “Denominational Religious Education”. This is defined as “formation” in a belief system leading to a life lived according to such beliefs and the moral values derived therefrom. It is to be distinguished from Religious Instruction, knowledge about religion (E.R.B), and indoctrination, and there is the clear statement that “Religious Education also incorporates a dimension of critical thinking.”
I find it difficult to distinguish between the necessity to accept specified doctrines and “indoctrination” and I think that a “dimension of critical thinking” is a difficult concept to apprehend. The need for the cultivation of critical thinking has become a mantra in education systems all over the world and limiting it to “a dimension” of our approach to any sphere of study seems unviable.

The challenge for the churches, especially the Roman Catholic church, as it is most likely to relinquish trusteeship of schools, is to devise programmes of religious education which will be delivered both within schools and, increasingly, through the parish framework. What will be the doctrinal content and what will be the methodologies of delivery? In the present circumstances I believe that there will be a great need for clarification of both these aspects, particularly in light of the fact that, as Archbishop Martin says, there is a dearth of theological development among the adults who will be increasingly expected to contribute to the formation.

Reference to “critical thinking” underlines the challenge posed to both churches and state. One of the great drivers of reform in education at second and first level, is the dissatisfaction with what is seen as reliance on rote learning and a failure to cultivate habits of sound reasoning and a rational approach to problem solving and learning. There is this call for “critical thinking” but I am not sure that the enormity of the change called for is realised. This is not surprising; even in California a centre of the modern development of critical thinking, where courses in such are mandatory in their colleges, there is concern that there is insufficient evidence of this approach in schools. “Critical Thinking” is overlapped by “Argumentation Theory” and “Informal Logic”, disciplines which have seen considerable development since the middle of the 20th century, especially in North America, particularly Canada, and on this side of the world in Amsterdam. These disciplines, applicable to all areas of experience, are concerned with the organisation of sound arguments in favour of claims and the recognition of spurious argumentation and invalid arguments. I am not aware of the extent to which such disciplines form part of teacher training at any level but it is unrealistic to expect that a “critical thinking” approach to learning called for here will be effective until it has become an instinctive tool of pedagogy. Critical thinking is no mean concept; it is as much a way of life as any other value system.
Finally, when the new trusteeship re-arrangements are well under way or, indeed complete, and the stakeholders are responsibly running their schools in accordance with their vision, the state will still have over-arching responsibility, not only for the aspects of the system which it shoulders today, but it will have to ensure that the system is permeated by a sense of public morality. It will have to insist that there are structures for the cultivation and nurturing of civic commitment. It will have to ensure the growth and formation of an ethics of citizenship leading to an inclusive, cohesive, democratic society. There is no need to elaborate on how necessary this is at the present time....elements of sectionalism and fracture are all too obvious. The state, having in large measure out-sourced notions of morality in what was thought to be a homogenous society will have to take responsibility for the cultivation and nurturing of commitment to the common good in the new dispensation.

I am delighted to say that the report from “The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector”, compiled by Professor Coolahan and his co-authors insists on the right to ethical education for those who do not participate in programmes of religious education since “The teaching of ethics includes the formation in and the promotion of a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings, the importance of human rights, the place of justice within society and the service of the common good. These are all essential to education in citizenship and the proper functioning of democracy.” (vi)

I would just add that I believe the state has a responsibility to provide such formation for all, whether or not they participate in programmes of religious education.

I heartily commend this report and, on your behalf I offer sincere thanks to Professor Coolahan.