

**Submission by An Chomhairle um Gaeloideachas
is Gaelscoileanna (COGG) to the National Council
for Curriculum and Assessment on the ‘Politics
and Society’ draft syllabus**

July 2009

An Chomairle um Gaeloideachas is Gaelscoileanna (COGG) welcomes the publication of the draft syllabus for consultation on the introduction of a course in Politics and Society for the Leaving Certificate, as a progression from the successful Junior Certificate course in Civic, Social and Political Education.

COGG subscribes to the NCCA's vision that the senior cycle should provide learners with "a high-quality learning experience to prepare them for the world of work, for further and higher education and for successful personal lives".

Equally, we applaud the NCCA's stated intention of meeting "the needs of a diverse group of learners", approve of the Authority's stress on the contribution that education can make to the development of the pupil "as a person and as a citizen" and endorse the Authority's attempts to enhance, through changes to the curriculum, the promotion of social cohesion, economic growth and the principles of sustainability in all aspects of development.

An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta was founded under the provisions of Article 31 of the Education Act of 1998, to establish a structure to cater for the educational needs of Gaeltacht schools and of Gaelscoileanna and to assume responsibility for the development of the Gaeltacht and Irish medium sector and the teaching of Irish in all schools.

With those aims in mind, COGG supports the vision of the NCCA that learners completing senior cycle should have the capacity to be resourceful, creative, open-minded and problem-solving; should be confident and possess high self-efficacy, ethics, values and beliefs; should be engaged and capable of making a contribution to their own material well-being and the material well-being of society; and should be in a position to pursue excellence in learning and have developed intellectual, critical and autonomous thinking skills.

The stated purpose of the CSPE course is to instil in pupils a sense of belonging in their communities, and to give them a capacity to gain access to information and structures relating to the country in which they live, and an ability and the confidence to participate in democratic society. In COGG's view, the proposed Politics and Society should build on these gains amongst learners at Junior Certificate level and build pupils' capacity to engage maturely in active citizenship.

To do so, we contend that learners need to have acquired a range of attributes:

- They should have developed a knowledge and understanding of current political ideas, of the political process, the political institutions and the political culture of the island in which they live – North and South of the border - and how these interact;
- They should be equipped to analyse the structures of power and authority in Ireland and how these may be compared to those of differing political systems, and have a knowledge of the politics of the European Union;

- Should have a broad understanding of how Irish political parties operate, their background and development, and an ability to analyse their political concepts and philosophies;
- Should be able to distinguish the related roles of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary and assess the role played by Government departments and the many other important agencies of the State;
- Should have an informed, comparative knowledge of contemporary international politics and an ability to assess differing political ideologies;
- Should have a comprehensive grasp of the rights and responsibilities of the individual and be capable of engaging in political issues at local and national level.

Broadly, students completing the Politics and Society course should have the capacity to absorb political information, the ability to construct and communicate coherent arguments, should have a ready grasp of contemporary political concepts and should be able to debate the merits of particular policy proposals in a comprehensive, contextualised manner.

From An Chomhairle's point of view, the nature of Irish society has unique, diverse elements:

- A first, official language utilised by a vibrant, growing community of Irish language speakers; and
- A community whose rights are recognised and whose requirement for public information and ability to conduct business with State institutions are formalised domestically in the Official Languages Act and, at European level, by the recognition of Irish as a working language of the EU.

No sociologist would attempt to quantify the importance of the Irish language to 'Irishness' but students would be at a grave disadvantage in attempting to identify the nature of the culture they inhabit without an acknowledgement of its centrality.

There must be, too, a recognition of the fact that while a substantial number of people in the State aspire to the unity of the entire island, there is also a formal acknowledgement by the State that a majority north of the Border see themselves as British – and wish to retain the union with Great Britain, despite their geographical remove from the countries which make up that entity

These factors are of importance in **Unit 1: Interdependence and conflict** and are crucial to the development of 'a capacity for reflective and active citizenship' - set forth as a core aim of Politics and Society – and to schooling students in the means of taking action at local, national or international level.

For students in Irish-medium education, it would be problematic to attempt to describe the operation of “institutions with which they are familiar” – including schools - without a knowledge of these considerations.

Equally, in any discussion of the concept of human rights, the right to conduct one’s affairs in one’s own language is amongst the most basic entitlements of a citizen.

Additionally, it would be blinkered in the extreme to attempt to evaluate the Irish constitution – Bunreacht na hEireann – without a comprehensive knowledge of a document which exists in two languages, but where the Irish language version will occasionally take precedence in the event of a dispute.

Finally, any genuine perspective on how society may be “characterised by fundamental conflict between groups” could hardly ignore – or fail to be informed by – the divided nature of the island of Ireland and the divisions among its all-island population.

Similarly, in **Unit 2: Globalisation and localisation**, a knowledge of the differing historical, political, religious and linguistic traditions on the island – and an awareness of the manner in which and the degree to which they have been reconciled to date - would be an essential building block in any description of the patterns of ethnic and cultural diversity which exist in a local context.

The draft syllabus ‘Politics and Society’ proposes a course comprised of two parts, the more substantial of which is the unit entitled ‘Interdependence and conflict’, comprising seven topics or modules: ‘Active citizenship’, ‘Democratic governance’, ‘Democratic practices in small groups’, ‘Cultural and normative accounts of social order’, ‘Divisions in society’ and ‘Comparing perspectives on interdependence and divisions in society’. The smaller unit comprises four topics or modules: ‘Diversity in contemporary societies’, ‘Understanding the relationship between equality and diversity’, ‘Perspectives on development’ and ‘Understanding sustainable development’.

While COGG respects the ambitious scope of these two units, we would make a number of observations:

The broad pitch of these topics would appear to be aimed at an undergraduate student population rather than a post-CSPE cohort with a basic knowledge of the citizen’s rights and responsibilities, and the concepts of democracy, law, development and interdependence (see UCD comparison below).

The thrust of the modules is directed towards giving students a perspective on political philosophy – Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Marx – rather than a grounding in political science and, say, introducing pupils to the social theory of Millett rather than allowing them to use the analytical tools of social science to gain an understanding of the society in which pupils live.

Clearly, to understand the science, some knowledge of the underlying philosophy is required but we think the balance should be initially skewed towards giving Leaving Certificate students a knowledge of how things are, rather than how they might be – for good or for ill. The emphasis throughout is on the abstract – the ideas of Marx, the social theory of Durkheim, the economic perspective of Milton Friedman – rather than on concrete institutions or discrete social phenomena.

This focus on the theoretical leads to a minimisation of the distinctively ‘Irish’ elements in the course: in the ‘Democratic governance’ module, for example, the role of the Irish constitution, the Irish voting mechanism and the impact of international human rights agreements on Ireland are three sub-topics, when each might be argued to deserve much more substantial scrutiny. Not to labour the point, but the system of proportional representation with single transferable vote – notoriously complex – is merely one of five items in one sub-topic of six in the same module, though clearly a comparative perspective e.g. the list system etc. is worthwhile.

Similarly, in ‘Divisions in society’, students are asked to describe the concept of social class in Ireland, by reference to the Irish census and ‘consumer categorisation’ as one of five sub-sections of what is in itself a sub-topic, where students are intended to learn about Marxist conceptions of the political and social world.

Finally, in relation to the current all-island outlook of all the major political parties, there is only one reference to the major political development of recent years, a quote in the introduction from The Report of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship to the effect that “the Good Friday Agreement (and increased migration) have extended traditional notions of Irishness”.

A subsequent quote from the same report might well be taken on board in deciding course content for Politics and Society, with its stress on “the need to develop our understanding of the European dimension of active citizenship, between and among the people of Europe”.

Conclusion

COGG accepts the contention that the changing national and international environment presents both challenges and opportunities to our young people and that, for its part, the Irish educational system must seek to equip them with a range of skills, knowledge, values and attitudes so that they may thrive – intellectually and practically, in their day-to-day lives – in this milieu.

In the ‘new’ Ireland, there is little doubt of the merit of the notion that they will require intercultural skills to enable them to relate to, understand and communicate with people from diverse backgrounds.

But COGG would seek to emphasise that our young people can only do so, from a clear knowledge of who they themselves are, from a critical understanding of the society which has reared them as much as the one into which they are emerging, and with a capacity to evaluate objectively both traditional notions of Irishness and the evolving multicultural norms of 21st century Ireland.

This country was not a mono-cultural entity before the new migration and the pre-existing cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity of the people of this island are essential to an authentic account of the society we inhabit.

Only with that understanding, COGG believes, can students be legitimately armed to respect rights, responsibilities and diversity and reasonably equipped – and expected – to have a capacity for independent thinking and a commitment to engage in peaceful and democratic means of resolving differences.

Finally, An Chomhairle um Gaeloideachas is Gaelscoileanna wishes to congratulate the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment for its initiation of the consultation process on the Politics and Society draft syllabus, and to applaud the breadth of its vision in seeking to accommodate the develop of the learner's capacity to engage in reflective and active citizenship, informed by the insights and skills of social and political science.