

Irish Independent 8th October 2014

Politics and Society should form part of Leaving Cert curriculum



Gerry Jeffers



Michael D Higgins was advocating political education in schools in the 1980s

Back in the 1980s I edited a magazine called *Young Citizen*. It aimed to engage students and teachers with issues such as rights and responsibilities, democracy, conflict, etc.

In many schools, civic education was regarded as a marginal activity. While there was some curricular space in the junior cycle, there was none at senior cycle. Unlike most other countries, Ireland didn't offer older teenagers an

opportunity to study politics or sociology as a distinct Leaving Certificate subject.

At that time, one of the few voices calling for a new Leaving Cert subject that would address current issues in society was a university lecturer in Galway named Michael D Higgins. He was concerned that young people learned so little about the institutions of their country, how decisions are taken, how power is exercised.

He wanted them to learn more about philosophical thought and to explore the meaning of words like fascism, socialism, democracy, liberalism and laissez faire. Since then Michael D has had a distinguished career as a human rights activist, a government minister and now as President of Ireland. Meanwhile we still don't have the Leaving Certificate subject he advocated.

Internationally, the last 30 years has seen a rising appreciation of the importance of education for citizenship. In Ireland, the development of Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) as a junior cycle subject sharpened the focus on human rights and the importance of citizens taking action.

In many schools, Transition Year students now engage in imaginative projects that explore difficult and challenging issues. For example, the Young Social Innovators initiative offers powerful evidence of young peoples' appetite for serious analysis of topics as diverse as sustainable living, mental health, inequality and human trafficking. Despite whetting their appetite for on-going engagement with such real-life issues, there is still no social and political Leaving Certificate subject.

In 2006, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) began consultations for a new Leaving Certificate subject, Politics and Society. A draft syllabus was presented to the Minister for Education and Skills in 2011. It is

exciting and imaginative, relevant and challenging. It seeks to develop young peoples' ability to be reflective and active citizens by using the insights and skills of the social and political sciences. It embodies very well the key skills of information processing, being personally effective, communicating, critical and creative thinking and working with others. Unfortunately, it remains on the shelf.

In the recent briefing document to Minister for Education and Skills Jan O'Sullivan, prepared by her officials, Politics and Society is mentioned as an example of one of the subjects 'being currently developed'. More encouragingly, however, that document highlights the need to 'adapt and reform the structures and improve the performance of the education system' notwithstanding 'diminishing resources'.

Fast-tracking Politics and Society is one example of manageable reform the minister could take now. Its introduction could greatly enrich the learning experiences of young people and further equip them to thrive in the complex, culturally diverse, increasingly globalised world.

Dr Gerry Jeffers, researcher and lecturer, is currently researching a book on Transition Year.