



14 December 2006.

**SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EDUCATION IN SENIOR CYCLE:
PSAI RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION PAPER**

Executive Summary

- The Political Studies Association of Ireland (PSAI) is grateful for the opportunity to provide a formal response to the document published by the NCAA in September 2006 on the development of a Leaving Certificate course on social and political education (Tormey, 2006);
- We hope that this merely represents our first formal input in the full development of a Leaving Certificate course in social and political education, and that the PSAI as a crucial stakeholder in political education will continue to be involved at course committee level as the NCAA moves through the process of agreeing a subject template and draft syllabus in the first half of 2007;
- The PSAI firmly believes that the title of the course not be 'Citizenship Studies' but rather a more user-friendly formulation which fits in with the titles of established Leaving Certificate courses. The PSAI recommends that the new course be titled 'Politics and Society';
- The PSAI looks forward to discussing with NCAA how we might formalise a relationship between secondary and higher education in politics. As an Association, we will need to engage in further consultation with our members, and with Heads of Departments, to promote an enthusiasm amongst politics lecturers for such a connection and to ensure that lecturers are rewarded for participation in activities such as in-service training;
- This idea of human agency is central to our thinking of active democratic citizenship – without an emphasis on how each of us is able to engage in public life, a Leaving Certificate course would still be able to produce students with a clear academic knowledge of the political process, but at a very passive level;
- The Political Studies Association of Ireland strongly believes that the course committee requires a subject expertise when drawing up the syllabus, and as a partner in the process feels we should nominate a representative to serve on the committee to provide that expertise;
- The PSAI would be more than happy to help facilitate the provision of some course-specific in-service training for teachers, and hopes as a starting-point to build a mutually-useful relationship with the Association of CSPE Teachers and the CSPE Support Service;
- The PSAI is also prepared to assist in the development of material such as guidelines for teachers, bibliographies, and website resources to support the course;
- In our view, the syllabus should focus on the development of key (and transferable) personal skills and on promoting an individual understanding of

political issues rather than on the simple acquisition of information about political institutions;

- The Political Studies Association of Ireland strongly favours a Leaving Certificate course in social and political education which is sharply focused on active democratic citizenship;
- The PSAI would prefer to see the development of an examined full course which has a clear focus out of which rises natural interdisciplinary connections, rather than one which combines the subject matter of the social sciences collectively;
- An effective Leaving Certificate course should be taught in such a way as to emphasise the issues which interest pupils and to emphasise the ways in which they can exercise their voice on those issues;
- Social and political education, perhaps more than any other Leaving Certificate subject, ought to be capable of capturing students' interest and enthusiasm as it relates most directly to their day-to-day circumstances and to their aspirations. Politics is said to be a contact sport rather than a spectator sport. It should be taught at Leaving Certificate level so as to give pupils real-life practice at political involvement;
- Social and political education is particularly conducive to imaginative and innovative teaching methods. The full range of delivery mechanisms should be considered, certainly including some traditional teacher/textbook-led classes, but also going beyond this;
- A Leaving Certificate course on social and political education has a clear role to play, in terms of not simply teaching pupils how democracy functions but also of encouraging them to become active participants in democratic citizenship; and
- The introduction of a Leaving Certificate course in social and political education may only be one element of the vision of an Ireland in which all citizens have the necessary knowledge and skills to contribute to public life, but it is a necessary foundation for all other efforts.



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Introduction

The Political Studies Association of Ireland (PSAI) is grateful for the opportunity to provide a formal response to the document published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCAA) in September 2006 on the development of a Leaving Certificate course on social and political education (Tormey, 2006).

Before commenting on the detail of the proposal, it may be useful to give a brief introduction to the PSAI. Established in 1982, the Political Studies Association of Ireland (Cumann Polaitheolaíochta na hÉireann), exists to promote the study of politics in and of Ireland. The Association is interested in politics, not simply in Irish politics. It represents the totality of politics as it is taught and researched in Ireland. Our membership (of approximately 300) is made up largely of academics and postgraduate students, but is open to all who have an interest in politics. We hold an annual conference each October, and a postgraduate conference each Spring. In addition, the PSAI sponsors seven specialist groups which allow those interested in a range of sub-disciplines to collaborate together. These groups cover: Democratization, Conflict & Peace Studies; Diaspora Studies; European Studies; Interest Groups and Lobbying; International Relations and Area Studies; Political Theory; and Urban Politics. Further information on all the PSAI's activities can be found on our website at www.psal.ie.

The PSAI also produces a number of publications – a series of guides to Irish election results, a monthly e-mail newsletter for members, and (in association with Routledge) the standard textbook, *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, edited by John Coakley and Michael Gallagher (currently in its fourth edition). Our peer-reviewed journal *Irish Political Studies* will appear 4 times a year from 2007, including a Data Yearbook issue (which provides comprehensive data on politics, elections and public opinion over the previous year). Founded in 1986, *Irish Political Studies* has served a crucial constituency of academics, students, journalists and political practitioners. It is the fundamental resource for any serious study of contemporary Ireland, and has contributed significantly to a greater understanding of Irish political science and history, and has helped to place Irish politics in a broader comparative perspective. The journal's co-editors are Professor Jon Tonge (University of Liverpool) and Dr John Garry (Queen's University Belfast).

This response to the consultation document has been produced by the PSAI's Executive Committee, taking into consideration views expressed by our members and by the Heads of Departments of political science at Irish universities. **We hope that this merely represents our first formal input in the full development of a Leaving**

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Certificate course in social and political education, and that the PSAI as a crucial stakeholder in political education will continue to be involved at course committee level as the NCAA moves through the process of agreeing a subject template and draft syllabus in the first half of 2007.

Background

Some civics content has featured at post-primary level in Ireland since 1966 and since 1997, Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) has been a compulsory course at Junior Certificate level, and detailed guidelines for teachers have been produced (NCCA, 2005a). It is a useful foundational course, though at present accounts for 72 hours of class time over three years, or approximately a single 40 minute session each week. The course is divided into four units:

- The Individual and Citizenship
- The Community
- The State – Ireland
- Ireland and the World,

and structured around seven key concepts:

- Democracy
- Rights and Responsibilities
- Law
- Human Dignity
- Interdependence
- Stewardship
- Development.

Clearly, it is important that the lessons learnt from the experience of this Junior Certificate course are applied in the planning and implementation of a Leaving Certificate course on social and political education. A survey of principals and teachers was commissioned by NCCA (Redmond and Butler, 2003) which highlighted some issues which should be addressed as the Leaving Certificate course is being developed:

- 41% of principals reported a difficulty in finding staff willing to teach CSPE, 7.9% noted a lack of suitably qualified or trained staff, and 2.9% were assigning history or geography teachers to cover the CSPE course (p. 6);
- 11.6% of principals felt there was a need for more in-service training in CSPE, and 2.7% suggested that some teachers are unwilling to train for CSPE (p. 8);
- 7.2% of principals believed that CSPE is not taken seriously by teachers/management (p. 13);
- 33% of principals said that CSPE teachers and teachers of other subjects are probably not or definitely not encouraged to work on collaborative projects,

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59% said that other staff are probably not or definitely not briefed on the work of CSPE in the school, and 35.8% stated that parents are probably not or definitely not strongly urged to speak to the CSPE teacher at parent-teacher meetings (p. 14). The proportion of CSPE teachers making the same responses to these questions were 71.6%, 80.3% and 57.8% respectively (p. 52);

- Of those CSPE teachers with a maximum of 10 years teaching experience, only 7.6% had taken an elective course in CSPE as part of their pre-service training (p. 23);
- Only 14.3% of CSPE teachers had actually asked to be given a CSPE class, whereas 77.1% had either simply been given a CSPE class on their timetable without being consulted or had been asked by their principal to take a CSPE class (p. 24);
- 41.9% of CSPE teachers have attended no out-of-school in-service CSPE training, and 54.1% of CSPE teachers have attended no in-school in-service training in CSPE (p. 27);
- 89.7% of CSPE teachers have never attended any non-DES organised in-service training in CSPE (p. 28);
- Between 10% and 44% of CSPE teachers never consult a number of critical CSPE documents, including the syllabus, teachers' guidelines, exemplar materials, the Chief Examiner's report, exam guidelines, or DES circulars on the subject (p. 29);
- 46.7% of CSPE teachers either disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that it is possible to complete the CSPE course within the recommended time of 72 hours over three years (p. 37); and
- 25.6% of CSPE teachers stated that teachers who express an interest in the subject are probably not or definitely not allocated to CSPE in their school.

More positively, in the same survey (Redmond and Butler, 2003), it emerged that:

- 62% of principals supported the idea of some form of follow through subject at Leaving Certificate level – out of 135 responses here, 27 principals favoured a compulsory exam subject, 65 favoured a non-compulsory exam subject, 13 wanted to see a compulsory non-exam subject and 30 preferred a non-compulsory non-exam subject (p. 16);
- Teachers generally view the documents associated with the CSPE course as being either very useful or useful – syllabus (86.2%), teachers' guidelines (89.5%), exemplar materials (80.9%), textbook (95.1%), and resource materials provided by NGOs (91%) (p. 31);
- 68% of teachers supported the idea of some form of follow through subject at Leaving Certificate level – almost half favoured a non-compulsory exam subject, around one-fifth favoured a compulsory exam subject, less than 10% wanted to see a compulsory non-exam subject and around one-fifth preferred a non-compulsory non-exam subject (p. 39); and

- Teachers tend to believe that the CSPE course has a positive impact on students: for example, 84.4% agreed or strongly agreed that it helps students to experience real political/social action; 94.2% agreed or strongly agreed that it helps students to develop greater political and social awareness; 91.2% agreed or strongly agreed that it helps to promote co-operation and teamwork among participating students; 91.7% agreed or strongly agreed that it helps students to develop their communication skills; and 85.8% agreed or strongly agreed that it promotes the personal development of the student (p. 40).

Following that review, proposals were published regarding the future development of the Leaving Certificate level – including the suggestion that a new course in social and political education would provide, “a more focused exploration of the individual’s potential contribution to society and its political structures. It enables the student to better evaluate alternative analyses of society and to more clearly understand the role of the individual/group in the process of change at a community and national level” (NCCA, 2005b, p. 36). A detailed proposal for a new course in ‘Citizenship Studies’ was produced by the CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit (Ward and O’Shea, 2002), and the Political Studies Association of Ireland broadly endorsed this suggested framework. A further report outlining the findings of a consultation exercise on this proposal was issued recently (O’Shea and Ward, 2006).

The Political Studies Association of Ireland firmly agrees with the first recommendation of that 2006 review – that the title of the course not be ‘Citizenship Studies’ but rather a more user-friendly formulation which fits in with the titles of established Leaving Certificate courses. The PSAI recommends that the new course be titled ‘Politics and Society’.

While it is easy to bemoan the voting rates of young people – only 40% of 18-19 year olds and 53% of 20-24 year olds voted in the 2002 general election (CSO, 2003, p. 1) – the Political Studies Association of Ireland is conscious that too often higher-level academics have failed to engage in this discussion on a more substantive basis. It is clear that what happens at the secondary level impacts upon the educational attainment of university students. We acknowledge that one factor which has been lacking to date from the debate on civic education has been the sustained and constructive input of university lecturers and professors. Probably every academic member of the PSAI has at some point in their career bemoaned the levels of general political knowledge of our university students. We have not, though, until now taken as much responsibility for that situation as we should. As Hepburn says, “Long-term participation in curriculum planning requires a college-school connection. All of the critical reports on education call for closer ties between colleges and schools” (1987, p. 695). **The PSAI looks forward to discussing with NCAA how we might formalise a relationship between secondary and higher education in politics. As an Association, we will need to engage in further consultation with our members, and with Heads of Departments, to promote an enthusiasm amongst politics lecturers for such a connection and to ensure that lecturers are rewarded for participation in activities such as in-service training.**

Democratic Citizenship

We should be clear as to what the Political Studies Association of Ireland means by active democratic citizenship. As a legal concept, citizenship narrowly refers to the status of an individual in his or her relations with the state. One is a ‘citizen’ rather than a ‘subject’, and the fact of one’s citizenship confers both a number of constitutional and statutory rights (such as freedom of speech and consular assistance from the state when travelling) and responsibilities (including that one obeys the laws of the state). A more expansive and meaningful notion of citizenship, though, is that which involves the exercising of those rights and responsibilities – participation in the governing of the state, promotion of the public good. As Honohan (2004, p. 1) puts it: “Being a citizen in the first sense is essentially a matter of laws, and of fixed rights and obligations, while in the second sense it refers to people’s attitudes and behaviour”; a similar distinction is drawn in Nelson and Kerr (2006, p. 7). Active citizens are those who are engaged with public life and participate in it.

In a submission to the NCCA about the establishment of a Leaving Certificate course in social and political education, the Combat Poverty Agency stressed this participatory element: “Perhaps one of the most fundamental understandings that students might achieve is that societies and their political and economic systems are shaped by human beings and therefore can be changed by them. Also that they come to understand that they can influence change both personally and in the wider society and world and that they can do this now and not only in the future when they are adults” (2000, p. 12). **This idea of human agency is central to our thinking of active democratic citizenship – without an emphasis on how each of us is able to engage in public life, a Leaving Certificate course would still be able to produce students with a clear academic knowledge of the political process, but at a very passive level.**

In their review of citizenship education in 14 countries, Nelson and Kerr found that active citizenship involves a set of broadly common elements. In particular, it:

- “is fundamentally about engagement and participation in society
- focuses on participation in both civil and civic society
- is increasingly framed in the context of lifelong and life wide learning
- involves the active development of citizenship dimensions not just knowledge and understanding, but skills development and behaviours picked up through experience of participation in a range of contexts
- includes both ‘active’ and ‘passive’ elements
- encompasses theoretical approaches to citizenship – liberal, communitarian and civic republican – and ranges from more conformist, collective actions and behaviours to those that are more individualistic and challenge driven” (Nelson and Kerr, 2006, p. 11).



Political engagement and democratic citizenship are concepts which are key to our future national development. Clearly, secondary education – particularly at the senior cycle – has a crucial role to play in ensuring that modern Ireland is able to successfully achieve our current transitional to a multicultural nation which is underpinned by collective understanding of notions such as democracy, participation, advocacy, legitimacy, equality, and freedom. All senior cycle students could benefit and reach their full potential through a Leaving Certificate course of this nature. Indeed, if anything, it is most important that this course is taken by those students perhaps least likely to opt to take it: “Being concerned with the inclusiveness or equality of political engagement means working to promote the full range of political competencies in young adults who are most likely to feel shut out of political processes, particularly racial minorities and those who come from families with lower incomes or educational attainment” (Beaumont and Battistoni, 2006, p. 243). For that reason, the PSAI suggests that – while accepting the NCCA’s policy that a full course in social and political education at Leaving Certificate level should be optional – consideration could still be given to the introduction of a separate short course or transition unit in the area which would be compulsory for those students not opting to take the full course. Discussing high school courses in America, Niemi and Smith (2001, p. 284) assert that, “A strong case can be made that classes in civics and government should include students of all interests and ability levels. We are all equal as citizens, and the structure of civics, it is argued, should reflect that maxim”.

Social and Political Education for Teachers

The Political Studies Association of Ireland recognises the role that it should play in the development of this course, and welcomes the opportunity to participate in its planning and delivery. It is clear that many of the teachers who would be delivering this course to senior cycle students will not themselves have come to teaching with a politics degree, or even necessarily any exposure to politics modules in their degree courses. They will therefore need some intensive support as the course is launched, and thereafter topical updates on an ongoing basis. By no means is this situation unique to Ireland – writing in the American context, Stephen Bennett (1997, p. 51) noted that, “Political scientists must ... become more involved in the training of teachers and the design of civics and social studies curricula”, and two years later the same author asserted that, “If we really want to improve civic education in primary and secondary schools, political scientists will have to get involved in education at these levels” (1999, p. 756). **The Political Studies Association of Ireland strongly believes that the course committee requires a subject expertise when drawing up the syllabus, and as a partner in the process feels we should nominate a representative to serve on the committee to provide that expertise.**

Two areas which must be addressed in the detailed planning and implementation of a Leaving Certificate course in social and political education are the new supply of suitably-qualified teachers in the future, and the provision of in-service training for current teachers. As the Combat Poverty Agency has recognised (2000, p. 16), “In the specific course/subject being proposed there will need to be a cohort of trained



Social Political and Citizenship Education teachers to ensure high standards”. Similarly, Birzea *et al* (2004, p. 59) note that, “How teachers are prepared and trained to handle EDC [Education for Democratic Citizenship] in schools and elsewhere is of crucial importance to the promotion of EDC in education systems”. Given that senior cycle courses are substantially more academically rigorous than those at Junior Certificate level, it is crucial that teachers of the new course have a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Indeed, Ward and O’Shea (2002, p. 65) suggest as one long-term possibility, “A new cohort of teachers brought in through the development of a denominated Bachelors in Education to be called for example, BA in Social and Political Education or in Citizenship Education. In the event of a senior cycle social and political education curriculum becoming a permanent part of the Irish education landscape such an educational initiative may indeed be required”.

The PSAI’s view is that it would be natural and beneficial if, over time, increasing numbers of teachers taking the new course arrived at the teaching profession with a prior undergraduate degree or post-graduate diploma in politics. That in itself demands that the PSAI continues to engage as positively as possible with the NCCA and other agencies to ensure that the curricula of such higher education courses is appropriate to the needs of those of our graduates who wish to become teachers. We will welcome all opportunities to contribute to this process.

While a cohort of teachers now exists who have experience of delivering CSPE at Junior Certificate level, even they will need additional assistance in preparing for a new Course at Leaving Certificate level. **The PSAI would be more than happy to help facilitate the provision of some course-specific in-service training for teachers, and hopes as a starting-point to build a mutually-useful relationship with the Association of CSPE Teachers and the CSPE Support Service.** Elements of appropriate in-service training might include:

- Short introductory lectures by political science academics on topics covered in the syllabus;
- Meetings with politicians, civil servants, political parties, interest groups, journalists, NGOs to relate theory to practice; and
- Workshops at which teachers can discuss how most effectively to bring politics into the classroom – and how also to take it from the classroom to the community. (In some ways this is the most crucial aspect – as Roach indicates (2002, p. 6), “developing a democratic classroom climate depends more on a teacher’s behaviour in the classroom than their content knowledge”.)

This mixture reflects the philosophy underpinning the teacher seminars which have been delivered in the United States to 28,000 teachers by the Taft Institute for Government over the last 40 years – see http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/Taft_Institute/. A useful summary of the benefits of the collaborative approach taken by the Taft Institute can be found in Hepburn, 1993.



The PSAI is also prepared to assist in the development of material such as guidelines for teachers, bibliographies, and website resources to support the course. As Hepburn writes, “The need for well-written, up-to-date, effective educational material – textbooks, teacher guides, video lessons, etc – is endless” (1987, p. 693).

The Content of a Leaving Certificate Course

While this is not perhaps the appropriate place in which to detail in full the PSAI’s suggestions and recommendations as to the precise content of the syllabus for a Leaving Certificate course, the Association does hope that it will be able to play its part in those discussions by the course committee as they take place in the coming months.

Nevertheless, it might be useful at this stage to at least begin to indicate something of the general approach which the PSAI would like to see as the syllabus is fleshed out. **In our view, the syllabus should focus on the development of key (and transferable) personal skills and on promoting an individual understanding of political issues rather than on the simple acquisition of information about political institutions.** In other words, we hope that the course will seek to enhance the capacity of each pupil in senior cycle to see for himself or herself how politics impacts upon daily life and how he or she can exercise a voice; that is to say, an awareness of the importance of democratic citizenship and an understanding of how to practice it. Strachan *et al* warn (2002, p. 7) that, “Despite such reminders, civic education in established democracies such as the United States often focuses primarily on history, constitutional principles and individual civic duty. And, these are precisely the types of traditional appeals that do not work in mobilizing American young people”. The ultimate success of a Leaving Certificate course in social and political education ought to be not to measured in terms of young people’s partisanship or turnout at elections, but rather will be seen in their values and behaviour, their practical and meaningful engagement with Irish and global society. A recent article argues for a shift from civics education or ‘teaching citizenship’ towards a more participatory approach or ‘learning democracy’ (Biesta and Lawy, 2006); the Political Studies Association of Ireland concurs with the dual implications that a new Leaving Certificate course should be premised on student-driven and active engagement.

There are, therefore, a number of elements which should serve to underpin the learning outcomes of a Leaving Certificate syllabus:

- Political Knowledge: politics is not just about the formal policy-making process and the internal workings of official institutions, but that certainly is a part of politics. In order to be able to influence the political system, young people do require some knowledge of it. Current events and topical issues should be drawn up in order to illustrate how political, social and economic issues emerge and are dealt with. Nor can we simply assume any longer that

young adults in Ireland somehow have an innate basic knowledge of our political structures, given that the proportion of our population born outside the state stands at over 10% and can be expected to rise for some time. The content will clearly be focused around Ireland, but should at every opportunity relate the ideas of politics and democratic citizenship to a variety of dimensions – local, national, European and global.

- **Political Identity:** the course should encourage students to think of themselves as being politically engaged, as having a connection with and an impact on their communities and society. They should be able to articulate their own concerns and develop a sense of how they personally can act on those concerns.
- **Political Skills:** a course of this nature would be particularly well-placed to foster among all senior cycle students a range of portable interpersonal skills which both relate to political effectiveness and are needed for success in all areas of life. Public speaking, research skills, teamwork, leadership, advocacy/argumentation, critical analysis, organisational ability, negotiation, strategic and tactical thinking, and so on all can clearly be built into the syllabus of a course in social and political education. As Mary Kirlin puts it, “Democratic society inherently demands collective decision making. Thus, young adults must practice the skills necessary for civic engagement; cognitive understanding of democracy is not sufficient” (2006, p. 573).
- **Political Participation:** students should be exposed to the variety of ways in which they are able to access the political system. While traditional measures of engagement and involvement such as voting or joining political parties remain important, no less significant are less formal activities such as lobbying public officials, taking part in protests, participation in interest groups or signing a petition. Encouraging students to engage in public life at a level and through mechanisms of their choosing is not merely virtuous in itself, but it helps to establish patterns of involvement which persist over time: “In a benign twist on ‘voting early and often’, for instance, we know that if people develop habits like voting or activism when they are young, these patterns are likely to persist and wield broader influence, suggesting a kind of path-dependence for the political engagement of individual citizens” (Beaumont and Battistoni, 2006, p. 242).

As Beaumont *et al* write: “... voting and other electoral activities too often are studied in isolation from other important aspects of political engagement, including political judgment and reflectiveness, perceptions that one possesses relevant skills, and motivations to be engaged, such as a sense of politically engaged identity, a sense of political efficacy, and a desire to be politically involved regardless of whether one’s preferences or desired outcomes are likely to be achieved in the foreseeable future” (2006, p. 265).

We should make clear, at the same time, that the kind of higher-level learning we envisage being made possible by a Leaving Certificate Course can only happen in the context of the students first having received a thorough academic grounding in the



subject. Active citizenship in practice must be founded on prior classroom knowledge of passive citizenship issues. Lynch (2000, p. 10) notes the danger that approaching social and political education primarily from a practical perspective can result in it failing to achieve as high a status as it might otherwise – in the context of social studies in the UK, for instance, a utilitarian rather than academic focus “doomed social studies to marginalisation for many years and it was deemed to be a second rate subject in a strongly academically oriented system”.

The Political Studies Association of Ireland strongly favours a Leaving Certificate course in social and political education which is sharply focused on active democratic citizenship. In order for such a course to establish itself as a credible and well-respected element of the Leaving Certificate curriculum as a whole, it needs to be well defined and coherent. In the NCCA-commissioned survey of principals and teachers, it emerged that of 117 principals who believed that CSPE should be followed through at Leaving Certificate level in some form, only 22.2% recommended a full course in political education while 55.6% favoured a full course composed of modules such as sociology, politics, anthropology and philosophy (Redmond and Butler, 2003, p. 17). Similarly, of those CSPE teachers who believed that CSPE should be followed through at Leaving Certificate level in some form, only 15.2% recommended a full course in political education while 55.8% favoured a full course composed of modules such as sociology, politics, anthropology and philosophy (Redmond and Butler, 2003, p. 40). **The PSAI would prefer to see the development of an examined full course which has a clear focus out of which rises natural interdisciplinary connections, rather than one which combines the subject matter of the social sciences collectively.** We feel that a full course of social and political education will result in a virtuous cycle whereby as students come to value it, the status of the subject area will rise (at both Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate levels) among teachers, principals and parents.

The Teaching of a Leaving Certificate Course

Again, it would not be appropriate in this document to seek to prescribe how the syllabus for this course should be taught, but the PSAI does believe that some general comments can usefully be made, which we hope to have the opportunity to further develop as the course committee’s planning proceeds in detail:

- One approach which the PSAI believes merits consideration as the syllabus is developed is that known as the Agenda Setting Model (Perry and Wilkenfeld, 2006), in which students in a class collectively develop an agreed, researched and prioritised issue agenda which can then be acted upon. Often, this model additionally brings schools together in some form of convention at which issues can be debated and agreed on at a much wider level and at which public officials can then be lobbied by students. This model thus combines both a knowledge of political and socio-economic issues and a knowledge of political institutions and process, and moreover goes on to combine this knowledge with the development of personal skills used to advance the identified issues.

It also has the significant advantage of being oriented around the students' own political and social concerns and interests. As Perry and Wilkenfeld assert: "The assumption is that political action is driven by people identifying their needs and advocating for them in order to gain the desired response.... Furthermore, engaging students in political activities of their own choosing can promote more meaningful achievement of traditional course learning objectives" (2006, pp. 305-306).

- Senior cycle pupils may well not be captivated by the idea of 'politics' as they see it expressed through the mass media. Politics can appear to be an activity which is undertaken by middle-aged, middle-class men who display little interest in the issues of concern to this cohort of students. It is too easy for young people to feel excluded from the traditional view of politics. **An effective Leaving Certificate course should be taught in such a way as to emphasise the issues which interest pupils and to emphasise the ways in which they can exercise their voice on those issues.** As Lance Bennett suggests (2005, no pagination), young people tend "to define their own sense of politics according to networks of personal relationships aimed at adding value to their lived experiences" – and this may well manifest itself not in terms of joining a political party but rather through such activities as joining an environmental or human rights pressure group, volunteering in the community, engaging in a consumer boycott. While Ward and O'Shea (2002, p. 18) noted the points which can be made against an issues-driven curriculum, the PSAI believes that there is considerable scope for students themselves to set the issues which are explored in the overall context of a concepts-based curriculum.
- The PSAI firmly believes that it is important that this syllabus is written – and classes taught – in such a way as to enable pupils to see how democracy actually works. It is relatively easy to give students instruction in the formal or constitutional flow-chart for how a bill becomes a law. To do only that, though, runs the grave risk of further alienating young people from politics as actual political debate as it is portrayed in the media will appear not to follow the smooth constructions of the system on paper. The vision of politicians arguing in an adversarial manner is not an attractive one to many young people, "probably because our educational system has not trained them how to assess an argument on behalf of a political position. Large segments of young people do not understand that democracy requires public officials to make a case for their position, and then engage their political opponents in argumentation as the opposing sides try to find some mutually agreeable outcome. The public school system must inculcate an appreciation of how public officials conduct the people's business. Messy and noisy, yes – but indispensable to democracy" (Bennett, 1997, p. 51). Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1996, p. 57) agree that, "K-12 [primary and secondary] civics education gives too much attention to our government's clean constitutional components and arrangements and too little attention to the natural give and take (and sometimes rough and tumble) that inevitably occurs when large

numbers of diverse people are allowed and even encouraged to get involved in government”.

- Any subject can appear sterile and irrelevant if it is taught exclusively through traditional academic means. **Social and political education, perhaps more than any other Leaving Certificate subject, ought to be capable of capturing students’ interest and enthusiasm as it relates most directly to their day-to-day circumstances and to their aspirations. Politics is said to be a contact sport rather than a spectator sport. It should be taught at Leaving Certificate level so as to give pupils real-life practice at political involvement.** Longo *et al* suggest (2006, p. 315) that, “Students are less apt to gain political skills, values, and knowledge from sitting on the sidelines. It is through direct involvement in negotiating differences, speaking in public, solving public problems, and building public relationships that students become more effective citizens”.
- It is essential that politics is taught as being something that does not only take place in Government Buildings and the Dail, but rather that it is to be found in each community. Nor does it only happen through parties, but is much more inclusive and diverse than that. In the course of working in practical terms on their issues, students will come to need an understanding of the legal and institutional processes of politics – but this knowledge must be directly related to their already-developed interests, rather than being the starting-point of their learning. Lance Bennett observes that, “The challenge for civic education, simply put, is how to integrate and adapt these conventional ... virtues [such as knowledge of the formal workings of the political process and electoral participation] to the changing civic orientations of the new ‘self-Actualizing Citizen’ who may see her political activities and commitments in highly personal terms that contribute more to enhancing the quality of personal life, social recognition, self esteem, or friendship relations, than to understanding, support and involvement in government” (2005, no pagination). A useful example of a U.S.-centred website which provides resources linking students’ concerns with the political system can be viewed at www.sudent-voices.org.
- **Social and political education is particularly conducive to imaginative and innovative teaching methods. The full range of delivery mechanisms should be considered, certainly including some traditional teacher/textbook-led classes, but also going beyond this.** “Courses stressing the realities of democratic processes would lend themselves to a variety of small group interactions, videotapes, and, especially simulations. Guest speakers from interest groups, political parties, and political campaigns would help students to see politics as an intriguing set of actions rather than as a set of mind-numbing definitions and lists. Students could be asked to keep a journal and even to make contact with an elected official or political movement of some sort – and assessment could and should be modified to reflect the nature of the material” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1996, p. 61). There should be a substantial element of student-centred work, both individual and collaborative, and emphasis should be placed on critical thinking rather than fact-based learning. Different paths towards a single goal should be

encouraged as students come to realise that there are few absolutely right or absolutely wrong responses to any political question. Every political question can be contested, and students must be encouraged to learn how to explore a range of perspectives to a single issue.

- Finally, all of the above has implications for how the course should be assessed. Clearly, a traditional, individual, written exam would be capable of testing a student's foundational knowledge, ability for critical analysis, and capacity to develop an argument, but would be insufficient in itself for fully assessing the student's skill at deploying these basics in the context of a practical scenario. Therefore, the PSAI would like to see a practice-based element to the overall assessment (perhaps itself consisting of individual and group-based components) which should account for at least 50% of the total available marks. As Ward and O'Shea suggest, "A curriculum that seeks to address cognitive, affective and practical dimensions of learning should reflect each of these three dimensions in its assessment mechanism in some proportionate manner" (2002, p. 19); the same authors' recommendation (2002, p. 55) for three elements of assessment (portfolio, oral presentation and interview, and written exam) seems to be the PSAI to be sensible.

Conclusion

One group of scholars have suggested that, "We focus on the multidimensional nature of political involvement to emphasize that responsible democratic citizenship be understood as involving more than regular or rote participation in basic electoral or partisan activities. Rather, we define political engagement as incorporating overlapping sets of skills, motivations, and understandings that are intrinsically valuable and can also support and enhance a variety of political activities across the full range of citizens" (Beaumont *et al*, 2006, p. 251). It is because of this intrinsic worth and the fundamental importance of citizenship that the PSAI both welcomes the introduction of an optional full course in political and social education, and suggests that consideration be given also to the possibility of a compulsory short course or transition unit in this area. Roland Tormey notes (2006, p. 15) that: "The content and pedagogic approaches of CSPE ... has influenced later work on citizenship education in other countries while the decision to make CSPE compulsory and examinable has been regarded internationally as a signal of Ireland's commitment to the field".

The PSAI's views on Leaving Certificate social and political education are underpinned by a belief that senior cycle pupils are not disinterested in and apathetic towards politics. Rather, they care very deeply about significant public policy issues. According to figures produced by the National Youth Federation (2004, pp. 1 and 3), 85% of 16-18 year olds in Ireland want to have a say on local political issues and 55% of that age group stated that they are interested in politics. The key to successfully translating this interest and passion to a classroom setting is to allow pupils to define what they mean by 'politics', to focus on the current events in which they are interested and knowledgeable, to show them both how democracy is organised on paper and how it operates in practice, and to give them an opportunity to engage

practically with those issues – Lance Bennett suggests that, “Political standpoints for [young people] emerge fairly easily around issues that matter in their daily lives. Moreover, exploring shared experiences with those issues enables shifting the framing of those experiences from private to common concerns” (2005, no pagination). Hibbing and Theiss-Morse have argued that, “Although people ... are effusive in praise for the concept of democracy as well as for the basic constitutional structure of United States government, they recoil from what democracy looks like when seen in action and sometimes in inaction. People love the rules of the game but they hate the game itself. Such a hatred of democratic procedures is obviously unhealthy and apparently springs from a patently unrealistic set of assumptions about the nature of democratic politics” (1996, p. 58). **A Leaving Certificate course on social and political education has a clear role to play here, in terms of not simply teaching pupils how democracy functions but also of encouraging them to become active participants in democratic citizenship.** As David Begg of ICTU has said: “The need to encourage active participation does not end at 15 or 16 when students take their Junior Certificate exams. Indeed it could be argued that the case for preparing young people for participation is even greater as they approach 18, the age which marks an important transition to new legal entitlements, including the right to vote. What may be only theoretical at age 15 becomes practicable at 18” (quoted in Coleman *et al*, 2004, p. 6).

Speaking to the Athenians about apathy, Pericles said that, “We regard a man who minds his own business and refrains from participating in public affairs not as a quiet man but as a useless man”. As the world gets ever more complex and interconnected, it is increasingly urgent that Ireland does not produce a ‘useless’ generation. We enjoy a relatively stable democracy, but its successful future is not inevitable. Rather, it is contingent on young people’s willingness to address the challenge of active citizenship. Ireland has in the past been an international leader in the field of civic education, and must continue to be so. Kathleen Lynch has argued that, “The need for a sound social and political education ... has never been so great. Without it, our young people are forced to operate in the social and political world without the skills and insights that they need to be in control of their own destiny” (2000, p. 1). **The introduction of a Leaving Certificate course in social and political education may only be one element of the vision of an Ireland in which all citizens have the necessary knowledge and skills to contribute to public life, but it is a necessary foundation for all other efforts.** Roach asserts (2002, p. 4) that, “Civic education in high school is the last chance for a majority of young people to receive formal instruction and practice being citizens. Therefore [this] is a pivotal period in young political lives that can be impacted by teachers”.

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