WILLIAM PRIESTLEY

MANIFESTO

Proposed: Professor of Economics, John O'Hagan   **Seconded**: Dr. Emma Stokes, former Junior Dean

Platform

WILLIAM PRIESTLEY

Reform of the Seanad and tackling educational disadvantage are the main focus of my campaign. For the last ten years I have been addressing educational disadvantage in Dublin, Limerick and Mississippi. I have also served as President of Trinity College Students' Union (TCDSU) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI). Lifelong Learning, Informal Education and Drop Out Rates are issues that need to be given a national platform. As the most prestigious university in the country, Trinity needs to have a strong voice on education.

I'm running for the Seanad because I believe it has huge potential; we just need to free it from the vested interests of political parties. Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? has been the most frightening question of the last decade in Irish politics. The simple answer is that nobody has been policing the Dáil. The Seanad needs fundamental reform, but with the right structures in place, it can be an invaluable counterweight of ordinary citizens to the rampant malaise we have been suffering for too long.

Sadly, the Seanad has become defined by expenses scandals, golf outings and anonymity. A slothful satisfaction with the current status quo of patronage and elitism has long stymied the effectiveness of the House. The majority of the sixty senators are elected by a coterie of county councillors and party representatives, who see little difficulty horse-trading values and political alliances to secure the seats they want. The final eleven are appointed by the Taoiseach, possibly the most blatant example of 'jobs for the boys' in our political system.

If attempts are not made to reform the Seanad in the immediate future, it should be abolished. For many people at the moment it is nothing more than a FAS course for budding TDs or an A&E department for defeated Dáil candidates. Broadly speaking, the Seanad was meant as a forum for educated counsel and as a safety check on the power of the Dáil. While the current situation is far removed from such purpose, reform is possible. We can easily achieve this by addressing *who* is doing the work, *why* they are doing the work and *how* they are doing the work.

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Seanad Reform

UNIVERSITY (TRINITY) PANEL

WILLIAM PRIESTLEY

The Seanad was originally meant as a forum for educated counsel and as a check on the power of the Dáil. The house is divided into five Panels: the Administrative Panel, the Agricultural Panel, the Cultural and Educational Panel, the Industrial and Commercial Panel and the Labour Panel. Each of these is meant to consist of individuals possessing special knowledge and experience. While the current practice is far removed from such theory, reform is possible. If elected, I will fight for reform in three clear ways:

Purpose

- Each Panel should consist of actual experts in their field removed from party whips.

- We then need to provide an avenue for their work to progress by allowing each Panel to table one bill in the Dáil chamber every term. This innovative step would be a means for grassroots issues to reach the corridors of power without the taint of party influence.

- The Panels can also serve as interview committees, similar to the structure in the U.S. Senate, where high profile public appointees undergo a rigorous interview in public. Experts in the field are much better placed to make decisions on the suitability of a candidate than the average TD.

- Similarly, Senators can serve as public appointees on the various national bodies, removing the temptation of patronage so common in Irish political life. Up until recently, friends, girlfriends and business partners all had a reasonable chance of being appointed to positions of national importance.

- Another opportunity to develop the powers of the Seanad would be for the House to serve as an overseer of our MEPs, none of whom are accountable to the Dáil, and then ultimately the President, who, when aligned to the same party as that in power, as has been the case for the last ten years, is beyond reproach.

Representation

- The Taoiseach's appointees need to be the first to go. Our politicians have shown themselves incapable of using this opportunity positively; for example by promoting integration with the north, the non-national community or other minority groups. They have only sought to promote their friends.

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Proper Representation

- It is equally lamentable that Senators are currently associated with their party before their Panel: for example media reports are structured in such as a way as to refer to members as Senator J. Murphy (FF), instead of Senator J. Murphy (Agriculture Panel).

- Most importantly, we need to reform the way in which senators are elected. I suggest a mixture of universal franchise, whereby each citizen would have the opportunity to vote for a specific Panel, and weighted input from national representative bodies. For example, members of the Irish Farmers Association (IFA) would have a block vote for the Agricultural Panel. Candidates need to demonstrate what they can bring to the position on account of their expertise, as against their party allegiance.

Transparency

- The Upper House cannot be allowed to serve as a back-up option for politicians. It has to be the stated objective of each candidate. A simple way to ensure this would be to hold the Seanad election on the same day as the general election.

- The Seanad register could be linked to the national register with the effect that all the relevant papers would be distributed at the same time. For example, all university graduates would be given university ballot paper in addition to their general election ballot at the polling station.

- The media profile of the Seanad can be raised. We need to promote quarterly reviews of the work done in the house on television and radio. There has to be a proactive programme initiated to be transparent such is the anonymity currently associated with the House.

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Education

UNIVERSITY (TRINITY) PANEL

WILLIAM PRIESTLEY

Over 10% of Irish school children will never sit their Leaving Certificate. Over one thousand will not even make it into secondary school. In fact, the only thing more disheartening about these figures has been the government's response to drop out rates and subsequent educational challenges. The tragedy that a quarter of all Irish adults scored in the lowest possible level of literacy in *The International Adult Literacy Survey* (2006) is only dwarfed by *The Prison Adult Literacy Survey: Results and Implications* (2003) which showed that this figure is double amongst our prison population. If elected, I will fight to have education recognised as a real priority. There are three areas that need immediate focus:

Drop Out Rates

There are three new departures we can make to tackle Drop Out Rates:

1. Focus on the support a child receives outside of school. The most disadvantaged communities in the country are relatively small. We can offer a service above and beyond the current level by creating an over arching, multi-agency strategy staffed by a dedicated team of professionals exclusively for that region.

2. Establish smaller class sizes. The advantages of this are clear, especially in environments where challenging behaviour is common. According to the INTO, the current class size at primary level is 24.5 pupils. With up to eight hundred teachers applying for each job at present, there has never been a better time to pilot an innovative solution.

3. Celebrate achievement over retention in disadvantaged communities. We need to support those who do reach third level as their achievement is the seed for so many others. When a young person does break the cycle the knock-on effects are tremendous. Bank of Ireland and schooldays.ie put the average cost of going to college at over €9,000 per year for a student living away from home. The maximum maintenance grant is €3,250. These figures say everything about the current commitment to educational disadvantage.

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Education

UNIVERSITY (TRINITY) PANEL

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Learning Outside of the Classroom

- Education is not the same as learning. When we think of education we think of places and structures: a classroom, a building, a state exam. Unfortunately, school - the iconic home of education - is often the last place in which we learn anything. In order to transform our education system, we need to recognise this.

- The opening of the first science museum in Ireland was celebrated last year at the National Wax Museum. More than anything, its title reflects our ambition: 'The Science and Discovery Room'. Currently, the Trinity Science Gallery is the only interactive museum of which we can be proud. Alabama, consistently one of the poorest states in America, has more science museums than the entire state of Ireland.

- Increased investment in informal learning is a very cost-effective way to significantly improve public understanding of science. Hobbies that involve science, including model rocketry, raising ornamental fish, gardening, rock collecting and stargazing are guaranteed to stimulate greater interest than any textbook.

- Research shows that children learn best through real life experiences and that outside learning significantly reduces stress, bullying and bad behaviour.

- The 'school-first' paradigm has been so pervasive for so long in Ireland that few question it. The dominant assumption is that school is the only place where and when children learn. Forty years of steadily accumulating research shows that this is wrong.

Lifelong Learning

- Lifelong Learning (LLL) is the voluntary pursuit of knowledge for personal or professional reasons. The EU has established a target of 15% of adults participating in lifelong learning by 2020. Ireland's latest figures stands at 9%.

- In contrast to their full-time counterparts, students of part-time and evening courses are subject to full fees. This contradiction is one of the greatest obstacles to lifelong learning.

- We need to align expectations. Most people currently marginalised by technology are interested in 'Simple IT'. Using Skype and paying bills, not spreadsheets and databases.

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Biography

WILLIAM PRIESTLEY

William Priestley graduated from Trinity College in 2002 with an honours degree in European Studies. He was elected Student Union President the same year. During his term he fought government cuts on the student grant and supported the expansion of Trinity's voluntary tuition programme. He drew up the blueprints for a student centre, a volunteer centre and a more inclusive campus.

He was elected President of the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) in 2003 and led the national campaign against cuts in third level education: making the case before the OECD and Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education. By emphasising the return generated by investment in education, he outlined the opportunities to raise completion rates, enhance Ireland's international reputation and most importantly, to keep graduates at home. Pink Training and Sexual Health Week were among the other successes during his term.

Following this, William spent two years volunteering in the United States at a disadvantaged primary school in Mississippi. He experienced the consequences of marginalisation first hand in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. During this period, he was awarded a Masters in Education on scholarship from the University of Notre Dame.

Since returning to Ireland, William has worked as the Literacy & Numeracy Co-ordinator in Youth Horizons (an outreach school in Jobstown, Tallaght) and as the Education Officer in the Bridge Project (an alternative to custody for high risk re-offenders) in Dublin's inner city. He currently has a senior role directing youth provision in one of the designated regeneration areas of Limerick. He witnesses the stark challenges faced by young people in that environment on a daily basis. One of his main focuses is the development of an innovative programme whereby leadership of youth facilities would pass to members of the community.

William has witnessed the inequalities of the education system at primary and secondary level. The breadth of his experience is almost unique. As the most prestigious university in the country, Trinity needs to have a strong voice on education.

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C.V.

WILLIAM PRIESTLEY

Youth Co-ordinator
Designation Limerick Regeneration Area

Education Officer
The Bridge Project, Dublin
Irish Probation Service

Literacy and Numeracy Co-ordinator
Youth Horizons, Dublin

Teacher
St. Peters, Mississippi, USA

President
Union of Students in Ireland (USI)

President
Trinity College Students' Union (TCDSU)

Education

2007
University of Notre Dame, USA, Masters of Education (on scholarship)
2002
Trinity College Dublin, B.A. European Studies
1998
Catholic University School, Dublin, Leaving Cert

Current Studies
NUI Cork, Certificate in Youth and Community Work