

ASTI Annual Convention 2022

**Clayton Silver Springs Hotel
Cork**

Address by Guest Speaker, Dr John Cunningham

April 19th 2022

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A Uachtaráin, a Aire, agus a chairde,

First, my congratulations on your 100th Convention, which falls, appropriately, during the state's Decade of Centenaries. This is not a coincidence for the establishment of the ASTI was part of a wider upsurge in social mobilisation in the early twentieth century, an upsurge which also produced such renowned bodies as the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, the Irish Women Workers Union, and the Irish Citizen Army.

Sula leanaim ar aghaidh, ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an gCumann as an gcuireadh. Is onóir dom é, agus tá súil agam go mbeidh an méid atá le rá agam suimiúil agus suntasach. Tá cuid de foilsithe sa leabhrán atá faighte ag gach toscaire atá ag freastal ar an gComhdháil.

Convention is when the ASTI and the wider profession is most visible, when it is scrutinised by the media and all interested in education. Critically also, it has long been the core of the robust internal democracy of the Association – a forum for the frank exchange of views and for the testing out of ideas. It has fostered camaraderie among active members, and acted as a two-way communication channel right through the Association, with branch minutes showing Convention-related business arising regularly throughout the year.

I've been asked here today to look at the history of the ASTI with a particular eye on Convention. For clarity, I'll divide what follows into four periods: (i) Foundation – from 1909 to the early Free State years; (ii) Accommodation – from the 1920s to the 1960s; (iii) Transformation – from the 1960s to the 1980s; (iv) and the period since 1990, to which I'm tentatively giving the title Consolidation.

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At the time of the ASTI's foundation, post-primary education was a small sector. It was more an examination system than an educational system, and it was what Padraig Pearse had in mind when he wrote about 'the murder machine'. It provided state funding for schools and pupils based on

performance in annual Intermediate examinations. With no other criteria for funding, there were no minimum standards of qualifications for teachers. Low pay and precarity were the common experience. As Hannah Sheehy Skeffington described it, you could be teaching a senior girl in a convent school, and if she joined the religious order during the summer, you might find she had taken your job in September.

A system of teacher registration, providing job security and minimum salaries was seen as vital by the teachers that began coming together in Cork from 1907, and that in July 1909 linked up with an existing Dublin body to form the ASTI.

So why have there been only 100 conventions in the 113 years since 1909? Well, the ASTI was a small body in its early years, and its members could all fit in a middling-sized room. Prior to 1923, the key decision-making body was the AGM, the venue for which was the Mansion House. Details are scant, but we have an account of the first AGM from Joe O'Connor, who was a teacher in St Brendan's Killarney:

The first General Meeting... [in] July 1910 ... was a memorable one for all concerned, the crowd was so great, and the atmosphere so charged with enthusiasm and derring-do... Paddy Breen of Listowel, Pro Enright of Tralee and I walked to the Mansion House and were shepherded to our places by a tall, slim, keen-eyed chap, who told us his name was de Valera, and he was teaching Maths in Blackrock...

This of course was Eamon de Valera, and you find other interesting overlaps in those years between ASTI activism and activism in separatist, cultural revivalist, and women's suffrage movements. In that regard, I've mentioned Hannah Sheehy Skeffington. I might also mention others like Thomas MacDonagh, and, in Cork, Mary MacSwiney, who was represented by the ASTI in 1916, when the Ursuline nuns who employed her became embarrassed by her political profile. In the light of such venerable names, however, it is interesting that the early ASTI entered an uneasy alliance with the British Liberal administration, which was promoting reform, in opposition to the

Catholic school authorities, who preferred the system as it was. Out of this came some steps towards registration and a set salary scale, with the state paying part of the salary.

From the beginning, the ASTI recruited men and women throughout the island without distinction. As things transpired, ASTI men were predominantly Catholic; ASTI women were predominantly Protestant. This was for two reasons: convent schools were staffed almost entirely by nuns; and also because the British-based union which recruited in Irish Protestant schools, did not accept women. The outlook of the early ASTI was very much that of professional body, but war-time conditions – pay grievances and a wider social radicalisation – caused a re-evaluation, and in 1919 the Association followed the INTO in affiliating with the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (then a single body). The first ASTI strike followed in 1920. Protestant members, however, were unhappy with the connection with Congress – which in the words of one of them was ‘frankly Bolshevist and Sinn Féin’ ASTI thus lost its women’s section, and indeed was partitioned before the island was partitioned.

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The earliest ASTI Convention, held in UCD on 3 April 1923, was a modest affair with about 20 delegates and some non-delegates in attendance. Poor attendances at AGMs seemingly prompted the move to Conventions. With the exodus of Protestants, only one delegate in 1923 was a woman. This set the pattern for most of the 1920s Conventions – small, predominantly male gatherings in UCD.

Early Conventions responded to notable reforms by the new Saorstát Éireann. The worst elements of the ‘murder machine’ were removed in a reconfiguration of the Intermediate education, which reduced the number of state exams to two: the Intermediate and Leaving Certificates. School funding was no longer tied to exam results; set texts were eliminated so as to discourage rote learning; and, of course, there was a greater emphasis on the Irish language.

There were achievement for the ASTI during the following decades. With regard to salaries, secondary teachers caught up with primary teachers, and by the 50th anniversary convention in Sligo, they were earning 15 - 20 per cent more. It was a small sector, so it didn't cost the state much to make concessions. The state indeed paid an ever increasing proportion of salaries, with the mainly religious employers paying the diminishing so-called school salaries. Otherwise there was steady growth in membership, with the Association reaching 1000 members during its jubilee year.

Salaries might have improved but there was a significant 'accommodation' with the realities of Church power in the new state. In the early 1920s, alongside the INTO, the Association had promoted social democratic values. However, following a debate at the 1927 Convention, it withdrew from the Labour Party and Trade Union Congress. In words of one Dublin member: secondary teachers were 'educators of the middle class, and as such, our connection should be with this class'. Thereafter the Association was isolated and inward-looking, and it was 1968 before it would reaffiliate with Congress. Well-paid as they were, members had no opportunities for promotion, and they had no say in the operation of the system or of their schools. As one-time president, Pierce Purcell recalled of his school in Clonmel in the early 1960s:

It was most important for the religious order to be able to claim credit for winning the cup, or raising the funds for famine relief. The lay teacher's place was in the background... An attempt to organise a school tour to London by myself and a colleague was rejected by the Christian Brother principal because he could find no brother willing to participate in the tour. I remember his words well: 'A Christian Brother presence is essential'.

Having held its first six Conventions in UCD, the Association moved out of the capital to Cork in 1929 and 1933; to University College Galway in 1935; to the Municipal Technical Institute in Limerick in 1936; to the De La Salle Training College in Waterford in 1937. Growing membership was reflected at these Conventions – the 37 delegates in Waterford included 16 women, and by the

late 1930s, the Convention was regularly a two-day event. In 1957 new ground was broken, when Convention met in a hotel for the first time – this was the Warwick Hotel in Galway. After that there was no going back. In 1958, the venue was the International Hotel in Bray, and in 1959, the Yeats County in Sligo.

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Now we come to the period of transformation, part of a wider transformation of the 1960s. In the educational sphere, Donogh O'Malley's announcement of free education in 1966 is well remembered, but it was only one of number of wide-reaching reforms of the 1960s and early 1970s, including the establishment of comprehensive and community schools, which bridged the chasm between secondary and vocational education, establishing the profession of post-primary teacher.

At the dawn of the 1960s, there was already a recognition by some at least that change was afoot. In his address to the 1960 Convention, ASTI president and future Minister of Education John Wilson made the case for more science in schools:

It is precisely because we know with such certainty what man's place in the universe is and for what end he is created that we can make a unique contribution to science study in our secondary schools... One of the most pathetic features of the last two decades had been the dilemma of men of science — materialists, often intellectual giants in their own sphere — in the face of moral problems created by their own discoveries... Scientists trained in our philosophic atmosphere should have no such problems.

Wilson's argument in essence was that there was no intrinsic conflict between the religious ethos of schools and the economic exigencies of the moment. Other presidents of the era were not as well disposed towards change. There was a sceptical response to the announcement of free education, while at the 1967 Convention in Athlone, Donogh O'Malley felt obliged rebuke an ASTI

president, who urged that no student be allowed to proceed to Leaving Cert without 'an adequate performance' in the Inter Cert.

Increasingly, such backward-looking attitudes would be challenged from within. Arising from the expansion of post-primary education, the ASTI trebled in membership to 3000 during the 1960s, and trebled again to 9000 during the 1970s. Radical and impatient, younger members shook up branch meetings and Conventions.

An element of the reform process was the introduction of a common school salary. Among ASTI members, accustomed to higher salaries, there was a wariness, which hardened into indignation on the publication of the Ryan Tribunal report in 1968. With the education budget stretched, there were no sweeteners. Younger members were critical of ASTI negotiators for their disposition to compromise, and for negotiating agreements that favoured those with long service. One indicator of unrest was that there were no fewer than four Conventions in 1968, the scheduled Easter gathering in Galway, and, driven by the dynamic Cork branch special conventions in July, October, and November.

There was a three week strike in 1969, which brought concessions from the government, provoking counter-strikes by the INTO and the Vocational Teachers Association, resulting in the withdrawal of the concessions and the declaration of another strike by ASTI in 1971. This strike was called off at the last minute to the chagrin of a youthful element, who descended upon ASTI headquarters in an episode remembered at the 'siege of Hume Street'.

Within a few years however members of the cohort that had besieged Hume St were using the structures of the Association to enhance the terms of February 1971, and were moving into leadership positions. Rapid growth necessitated structural change, which proved difficult to achieve, but new resources were provided: a *School Stewards' Handbook* in 1977; a full-time education officer from 1981. A significant development was the appointment of Kieran Mulvey as General Secretary in 1983 on the retirement of Máire McDonagh who had overseen the expansion of the Association since 1957.

It was a period when a cataclysmic fall in religious vocations was opening up promotional opportunities, and when negotiations on management structures for community schools fostered cooperation with the TUI. Relations between the teachers unions greatly improved. In response to cut-backs in the 1980s, there emerged Teachers United, which, among other initiatives, mounted an impressive demonstration in Croke Park on 8 December 1985. The cooperation culminated in a Council of Teachers Unions in 1990, and in plans for a single union for teachers. However, INTO delegates threw a spanner in the works at their 1994 Congress, and the TUI another in 1995. The project had to be abandoned.

Greater participation notwithstanding, internal democracy was imperfect in one important respect. With regard to conduct at Convention, future president Catherine Fitzpatrick recalled of the 1980s:

One thing that struck me at the time was that it was all very much back-room boys' stuff, which suited the 'boys' mainly. You'd have people campaigning late into the night at Convention. I'd have felt that I needed to go to bed at one o'clock or thereabouts, but the following day someone one say, 'Where were you at three o'clock when so-and-so was doing a deal?'

The electoral culture favoured men, and Fitzpatrick and others became determined that the female majority of ASTI members be heard. ICTU's emphasis on equality prompted the Association to provide training for female CEC members in 1984, and out of that came a fully-fledged ASTI Equality Committee by decision of the 1988 Convention. Improvement in female representation ensued from 1993 Convention decision that elections for Standing Committee be held on regional basis rather than at Convention. This would have an impact at all levels. With regard to the presidency, Mary McCarthy in 1979/80 was the first woman to hold the position since Nora Kelleher in 1958/9. There were two female presidents in the 1980s; two in the 1990s; four in the first decade of the new millennium; and four again in the second.

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Moving closer to the present, we reach a period of consolidation, a characterisation we might justify on the basis of the opening of the purpose-built headquarters in Winetavern Street in 1992, of the solidification of a full-time apparatus of industrial relations, educational, and media professionals, and of the settling of membership at around the 18,000 mark.

Of course it hasn't exactly been quiet consolidation, and circumstances at the turn of the millennium strained relations between the ASTI and the rest of the trade union movement, resulting in the ASTI decision to again disaffiliate from Congress. At issue was social partnership, a process championed by the ICTU and the majority of public sector unions. This was the era of 'the Celtic Tiger', when partnership had linked pay awards to productivity and had offered non-pay concessions in exchange for pay restraint. 'Benchmarking' was the productivity element of the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (2000) which brought matters to a head. With acute demands on their incomes, teachers at all levels were under pressure in their working lives from the consequences of rapid social and cultural change. Nonetheless, it came as a surprise when Standing Committee and the CEC voted to disaffiliate from the national body in January 2000. The disengagement was contrary to the wishes of the ASTI's industrial relations professionals, and it set the Association on a course of conflict both with the wider trade union movement and the government. Fractious Conventions, intermittent industrial action, frequent ballots, and unresolved industrial relations issues with the ASTI staff, culminating in the resignation of the general secretary, were among the headline-capturing episodes during the following dramatic years. Eventually compromises were reached, and a way was found back to ICTU in 2006.

Time prevents me from discussing more recent developments: the implosion of the Celtic Tiger, and the FEMPI legislation which grievously affected salaries, especially those of new recruits. Time constraints also preclude discussion of controversies around reform of the junior cycle curriculum.

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In the year that the ASTI held its first general meeting, novelist Arnold Bennett wrote of local newspapers that they were a 'channel through which the whole life of the town had somehow to pass'. A similar point might be made about ASTI Conventions, that for a hundred years they have been a channel through which the whole of Irish education has passed. After two years of meeting online, there is no need to remind delegates that Convention has been adaptable forum, evolving from the early general meetings, stirring out from UCD to educational facilities in other towns and cities from the late 1920s, and moving on to hotel venues when circumstances were ripe. Throughout, Convention has remained the vital life force of the ASTI, facilitating communication, connection, and common purpose between post-primary teachers throughout Ireland. Long may it continue.