

THE CLASSICS IN AN AGE OF INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

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A generation ago Greek and Latin were core subjects in the curriculum of most Irish secondary schools and held a central place within the Arts Faculties of the universities. Their educational value was accepted without question and they were seen as the ideal preparation for a variety of careers. The last thirty years have brought a dramatic change, and not only in Ireland but throughout the Western world. Greek has practically disappeared from our secondary schools and Latin is studied by only a small percentage of second-level students. The reasons are many and are well known. Rapid industrial development in the 1960s put a new emphasis on technical and scientific studies and brought a significant expansion in the number of subjects being offered in these areas. Commercial subjects also gradually made their way into the curriculum. The introduction of free education in 1967 created a more heterogeneous student body and the need to cater for a wider range of abilities and interests. This gave an additional boost to technical and commercial studies and made a place in the curriculum even for manual crafts. Membership of the EC generated new interest in the continental languages, and German, Spanish and Italian began to appear in many schools alongside French. All this meant a very crowded timetable. Subjects like Greek and Latin had to surrender space to the newcomers and had to compete with them. They did not fare well in these conditions. A new preoccupation with economic growth and technical advance and a new sense of relevance and utility in education, focused on the fastest means of acquiring a specific marketable skill, questioned the value of all studies that had an aura of the academic and intellectual about them and that seemed likely to produce a cultural and intellectual elite rather than a technically proficient and technologically innovative work-force. The Classics, dealing with a remote past and languages that seemed unlikely to be of much use in Brussels or in the boardrooms of Europe, began to look particularly out of step with the needs of the new age and the new Europe. There were other developments in the 60s and 70s that further weakened the position of the Classics. Roman Catholic seminaries, in response to the use of the vernacular in the liturgy, and anxious to exclude as few people as possible, dropped Latin as an admission requirement. This brought a quick decline in the numbers studying Latin, particularly in diocesan colleges. A more serious blow followed in the 70s when the universities, partly influenced by the restless questioning of all established educational assumptions and by a general antipathy towards all requirements, ceased to require Latin for matriculation. It became increasingly difficult to persuade students to select Greek or Latin from among the wide range of subjects available to them and also more difficult to persuade school administrators to retain and promote them. These developments at

second level obviously affected the position of Classics within the universities. Numbers dropped because few students entered with any knowledge of the classical languages or of the classical world. Classics departments responded energetically and imaginatively with intensive beginning language courses and new degree programmes, but they had to contend with the new perceptions of relevance and utility and with an often unsympathetic attitude from government, and from the funding agencies and even from the university authorities. It was a difficult battle and there were some heavy losses. And the battle is far from over. There remains a serious threat that, at second level, classical studies will be confined to a small, select group of schools and that, at many universities, they will survive only in a limited and emasculated form. The reason for my pessimism is that, while there is a growing consensus that education continues to assume an ever greater importance in the achievement of personal satisfaction and professional success and in the advancement of the general well-being of society, the level of pragmatism and of narrow utilitarianism evident in educational thinking is increasing rather than diminishing. Economic development is becoming more dependent than ever on the mastery and exploitation of technology. This continues to increase the pressure for a greater emphasis on technical training at second level and on science and technology at third level. The pressure is further heightened by the fact that the technological revolution has forever changed the character of the job market and has created a severe shortage of jobs in many parts of the world. There has resulted an understandable preoccupation with the creation of jobs and with the industrial development necessary to create them and with ensuring that young people have the technical skills to assist such development and to ensure their own employment in a technological age. There is emerging therefore more strongly than ever, from governments, from industrialists, from parents, from some educators and from a plethora of studies at EC and national level, a powerful bias in favour of an educational curriculum that has as its foremost objective the communication, by the shortest possible route, of technical skills that have an immediate and specific practical application. It is being urged that students should leave secondary school with a high level of vocational skills, especially those who are unlikely to proceed to third level, and that those who do go on should graduate with completed, marketable professional qualifications. This approach to education is well illustrated in the general tone and recommendations of the Culliton Report. The Report believes the present educational system is excessively academic, by which it seems to mean that too many of the subjects taught are non-technical and non-vocational. It is dismissive of the value of such academic education and says 'it provides a poor platform for subsequent vocational or industrial training'. It goes on to say 'The need now is to concentrate on the efficiency of the education and training system in meeting the manpower needs for industrial enterprise and development A major effort to reverse the trend of recent years and to place a new emphasis on vocational and technical training is the single action most likely to yield benefits in terms of industrial progress.' The Green Paper is less biased in its approach and urges a balance between the technological and humanities sectors, but here too there is a strong emphasis on the great buzz words, enterprise and technology, and on ways by which the educational system can contribute more directly to economic

development. There is particular pressure being exerted at third level to create a swing towards professional and applied subjects. The Colleges are being urged to accept more undergraduates into the areas of science and technology. At the postgraduate level state funding is provided only for students in these areas, with particular provision being made through an Advanced Technical Skills Programme for students in subjects deemed relevant to the manpower needs of indigenous industry. Public funding for research is again confined to scientific disciplines and more specifically to applied science. There is little or no support for pure or basic research even in the sciences, and none at all for research in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Recently when a number of new blood posts were approved for the universities they were restricted to areas likely to lead to industrial growth and it is apparent that the segment of the new tranche of structural funds allocated to higher education will be similarly restricted to these same areas. Much of this is understandable and, up to a point, sensible. There is an urgent need to create jobs and to promote economic growth through industrial development, and this can only be achieved through the full exploitation of technology. There is need therefore for skilled manpower, and the education system must provide for vocational or professional training at a variety of levels. It must also ensure that there exists the research capacity to develop new technology and thereby accelerate the pace of industrial growth. But there are very serious dangers in the degree of preoccupation with technical training, especially at an early age, that is evident in much of the public debate about education in recent times. First of all this preoccupation tends to obscure the fact that society has a need for varied forms of aptitudes and qualifications that go well beyond technical or professional expertise. Equally important with those who have specific technical or professional skills are those who have the general and flexible qualifications that can generate new ideas, that can organise and lead, that can point the way to social and political progress and to solutions to the moral and social dilemmas that are often a consequence of rapid technological development. Equally important too are those who can contribute to the aesthetic and cultural aspects of life and who can help provide a vital counterbalance to the many forces that are pressing modern society towards mindless materialism and a cultural wilderness. We must therefore avoid the temptation to concentrate educational resources in the areas that appear likely to contribute most directly to the gross national product or to push young people, irrespective of their aptitudes and inclinations, onto vocational tracks or into professional disciplines. To do so is not only injurious to individuals whose interests lie in other directions, but to society as a whole, which is deprived of the variety of skills essential to sustain the many-sided needs of a developed civilisation. But still more damaging is the fact that concentration on vocational training, especially at second level but also at undergraduate university level, leads to a stunting of a student's intellectual capacities and produces narrow specialists of limited potential. It is almost 2,500 years ago since the Greeks first argued that education must go beyond the mere communication of technical skills and concern itself first and foremost with training of the mind and the development of intellectual power. These ideas gave rise to the concept of a liberal education, which has been at the heart of western educational philosophy for two millennia.

The concept essentially holds that education must first provide a broad base of knowledge about man and his world that will ensure understanding of core areas of knowledge relating to language, mathematics and natural science, the human past and human intellectual and creative achievements. In the modern world, these core areas should, I think, be extended to include computing and basic technology. The liberal ideal also promotes the development of the mental capacities, the power of speech and of communication, the power of reasoning and analysis, the creative and aesthetic faculties. And it has an ethical dimension, aiming to develop a sense of social and moral responsibility in one's dealings with individuals and with society as a whole. The educational objectives and merits of the liberal ideal have withstood the test of centuries and should need little defending. They seek above all to prepare people for life not just for work. They are concerned to help people get the most out of life, to exploit the great cultural and intellectual riches of modern society, and to have the intellectual confidence and the essential knowledge to be participants in what is happening rather than uncomprehending observers. It is not fashionable any more to talk about the self-enrichment aspects of education but there is life outside of work, and education should prepare young people to take the fullest advantage of all opportunities to lead the fullest possible life. But the liberal ideal also seeks to provide highly practical qualifications and skills, the broad core of knowledge, but above all knowledge that is backed by intellectual power, by understanding, by skill in reasoning and analysis and in communication, and by a general intellectual sharpness and proficiency that can be a spur to creativity and new ideas and that can lead on to new knowledge and to continuing progress. These are the qualities that represent real brain power; they are the greatest resource a nation can have; they are the best means of maintaining the vitality and creativity that is so essential to the general well-being of society and that can produce the new ideas and the spirit of innovation that we hear so much about. But there are no shortcuts to achieving these educational goals. They require, as a first step, prolonged attention to basics, to developing the basic knowledge and the basic skills through a core curriculum of mainstream subjects covering the areas I mentioned earlier, subjects that must be taught by methods that are mentally testing and concerned with expanding verbal and mental proficiency. This is the form of education that I believe should be continued throughout the secondary stage of education. Vocational training or the introduction of applied or semi-vocational subjects on any significant scale at this stage is entirely premature and limits the opportunities of students to achieve their full intellectual potential and to keep all their options open. Students, of course, have different aptitudes and different levels of ability and a single identical programme is not appropriate for all students. There must be streaming and a sensible level of variation in the curriculum of the different trades, with some elective options. But I believe that the great bulk of students can benefit from, and indeed require for their full intellectual development, a concentration throughout the second level stage on central areas of learning and on the development of basic skills. Students do not cease learning on leaving school, and school should not aim to provide a finished product, rather a capacity to go on learning. Technical skills will be quickly mastered later by those who have acquired such a capacity. This is now the pattern in countries such as Sweden and Japan, and

the trend is gaining ground in many other countries also. The Culliton Report recommends going in exactly the opposite direction - a ruinous retrograde view of education. I would further argue that even at the undergraduate level there must be an ongoing emphasis on breadth and on the development of mental skills. Universities fail in their responsibilities if they conceive of undergraduate degree programmes in narrow vocational terms or as specialist training in a single discipline. Even within professional courses where specialised knowledge has to be a dominant element, that knowledge, if its full benefits are to be realised, must be preceded by a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter and methodology of the discipline concerned, which necessarily involves a knowledge of the fundamentals of complementary or related subjects. But within this area of the humanities, the undergraduate curriculum should be decidedly non-specialist and non-vocational, with the emphasis on breadth as well as depth and with a continuing focus on the development of the conceptual and analytical and communicative powers and of the proficiency of mind that Newman so cogently argued was the chief purpose of higher education. This is a form of higher education that is essential to the general well-being of any society, complementing specialised and professional training with more versatile skills and with the perspective and insight deriving from the emphasis of human studies on human affairs and systems and on human intellectual and creative achievements. It is the form of education most likely to provide the imaginative and innovative ideas necessary to sustain the vitality of any enterprise, and most likely to maintain the crucial balance in society between material progress and the development of the social, ethical, intellectual and cultural dimensions of life. The circumstances of the 1990s make it more necessary than ever to resist the temptation to introduce vocational training or excessive specialisation at too early a stage or to concentrate our educational resources in developing one range of skills or particular areas of expertise. Today's young people have to contend with a situation where knowledge continues to expand at a rapid pace, where technology is constantly evolving, where conditions of work, the demands being made, the variety of skills required are constantly changing throughout the professional and industrial world where there is a greater need than ever for resourcefulness and for innovative and imaginative ideas. The international dimension is also growing, requiring people to move internationally, to be able to adapt to different conditions, to cope with different languages and cultures and work environments. These conditions require above all, the capacity to go on learning, the capacity to upgrade existing skills, acquire new ones, learn new languages, to adapt to new developments or even to a wholly new career. The broader the educational foundations, the more varied the intellectual experience; the more developed the intellectual faculties, the better the chances of coping with these challenges. We must therefore resist the tendencies towards shortcuts and narrow pragmatism in education. We must resist the introduction of vocational training at a stage or on a scale likely to impede the communication of that broad and vital knowledge base and the development of the basic mental skills. And we must equally resist narrow specialisation at the undergraduate level and the pressures to push students onto vocational tracks rather than allow them to pursue their natural aptitudes and develop their intellectual powers more broadly. Only in

this way can the varied talents and creative abilities of young people be fully developed and exploited to meet the varied needs of modern society. The connection between all this and the world of Greece and Rome is that, in today's world, where brain-power is rightly seen as the greatest resource and where, to use Churchill's phrase, the new empires will be empires of the mind, I believe the Classics are more relevant than ever and more important than ever at both second and third level as a means of meeting the needs of the modern student. Greek and Latin are not mere subjects; they represent a whole world and involve a great variety of subjects including language, literature, history, political, military, social, economic and intellectual history, philosophy, religion, art and archaeology. They bring the student into contact with most of the major disciplines of the Humanities and with the character and methodology of these disciplines, and do so in the context of a brilliant civilisation that has coherence and completeness and unity. And this civilisation has the added importance that it forms the basis of our own. The Greeks and Romans evolved and often perfected all the major genres of our literature. Their legal and political systems and writings developed the principles of justice, political freedom and democratic rule that still govern the thinking and the constitutions of western democracies. Their achievements in philosophy were of paramount importance and have had a dominant influence on philosophical studies and on Christian thought down to modern times. Their art and architecture continue to fascinate and to attract imitators. In short there is little about the life and achievements of mankind that cannot be learned from the study of the classical world, and there is little in our own way of life and in our cultural and intellectual experience that does not continue to bear the imprint of that world. And, in addition to all this, there is the fascination of the classical languages. Their educational value is well-known and incontestable. They are the gateway to a literature of extraordinary originality and brilliance. Highly inflected, syntactically complex, they developed as literary and rhetorical media of incomparable power and clarity and subtlety and elegance. They are a most effective means to an understanding of the structure of language and of the importance of precise and lucid expression, and of the meaning of style. There are, of course, many other incidental benefits that come from a knowledge of Greek and Latin and derive from their influence on the development of European civilisation. Greek has provided most of our scientific vocabulary and much of our literary and philosophical terminology. Latin gave rise to the Romance languages and contributed a large proportion of the vocabulary of English. It remained the international language of Europe until about 800 AD. It was the primary language for literary expression until the 14th century and remained the language of philosophical and theological writings and of intellectual discussions until the 17th century. It is therefore of enormous value to anyone studying a Romance language or any aspect of the history, thought or literature of the Medieval and Renaissance periods, and it is indispensable to anyone doing advanced work in any of these areas. When one views the rigorous and interdisciplinary character of the Classics and the intrinsic merit and historical importance of their subject-matter, it prompts the question: how better can the goals of the liberal ideal of education be achieved than through exposure to a brilliant culture that constitutes a microcosm of human life and provides a highly attractive

medium through which to introduce students to many core areas of knowledge? How better can the linguistic and verbal skills so essential to success in modern conditions be inculcated? How better can the critical and analytical faculties and the powers of the imagination be exercised and strengthened than through a study of the period of greatest creativity and originality in European literary and intellectual history? And how better can students achieve an understanding of their cultural and intellectual heritage and of the social, political and ethical systems and ideas that govern their lives than through study of the evolution of that heritage and of those systems and ideas? And consider some of the implications of the disappearance of the Classics from our schools and colleges, the loss to young people of access to a glorious civilisation, the disassociation from the past, the ignorance of the continuities and constancies in western history and the severance from the origins of so many things of high importance that would result. Cicero once remarked that to be ignorant of what happened before you were born is to remain forever a child. That sentiment would find much sympathy these days when there is so much concern about our heritage and so much money is being spent to preserve and promote it. I applaud that. But beyond the national heritage and the important sense of identity that it provides is a wider heritage whose roots in our lives and culture run deeper. That too surely deserves to be preserved. The Classics have been a crucial and valued element of our educational curriculum at both second and third level for many centuries. There is nothing in the nature of our times that has diminished that value. On the contrary, the growing need for the more versatile skills and mental sharpness and creativity that are the goals of the liberal ideal has enhanced it. That is the message that needs to be vigorously stated and repeated.

Note This is the text of the address given by Dr Mitchell, Provost of Trinity College and Honorary President of the Classical Association, at the Inaugural Lecture of the Classical Association of Ireland in the Industry Centre, University College Dublin on 25th March 1993.

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