

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS delivered by: **PROFESSOR MARY P. CORCORAN**, National University of Ireland, Maynooth on 2 December 2009 in the Royal Hospital Kilmainham, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Education, *honoris causa*, on **JOHN WHITE**

A Sheánsailéar, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle (Chancellor, members of the University and Distinguished guests),

The National University of Ireland is proud to honour John White, General Secretary of the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland, in this the Association's Centenary Year.



The ASTI is a significant actor in Irish civil society, currently representing 18,000 teachers. Founded as a professional organization for teachers the association quickly established its trade union credentials. Over the last 100 years the ASTI has become a vital body for representing the interests of teachers and more broadly the cause of education in Irish society. As it celebrates its centenary the ASTI can be justly proud of the contribution that generations of teachers have made to the public good. As the great U.S. educator, Horace Mann, put it: "Education beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery." The democratization of Irish education in the twentieth century has been one of the great achievements of the Irish state, and the ASTI membership played a crucial role in that process. Over the course of its history, the association has had to evolve and adapt itself to changing circumstances facing down many challenges to the profession along the way. Now, in these turbulent times, having effective leadership is more crucial than ever. John White, who has the distinction of leading ASTI in this its centenary year, is widely regarded as "the right man, in the right place at the right time."

John White is a native of County Kilkenny. He received his primary education at Dunamaggin NS and attended secondary school at Callan CBS. Like many people of his generation John spent a period of time abroad. He was awarded a BA Honours degree from University College London and a Postgraduate Certificate in Education from London University and then taught for a number of years in the Inner London Education Authority. On his return to Ireland John completed his MA at UCD, and took up a post at the De La Salle College, Ardee, Co Louth, where he enjoyed a distinguished career as a teacher of English and History. The London sojourn is important personally as well as professionally for it was there that John met his wife Pauline Farrell from Ballycastle in Co. Mayo. John and Pauline have three adult sons, John, Rory and Robert.

John White held a number of senior posts in the ASTI before assuming the General Secretary position in 2005. He has been described as a "low key guy" who doesn't seek a public profile though nevertheless has disported himself with aplomb in the public arena. He is characterized by others as imperturbable and gentlemanly. In a profile earlier this year, *The Irish Times* described his style of leadership as soft-spoken and measured. Indeed, it is generally viewed that

John's has been "a calm and steady hand" at the rudder of the ASTI, keeping the ship on course during recent difficult years. As the distinguished educationalist John Coolahan told me: "John is a man of great integrity. He has demonstrated tremendous diplomatic leadership, and has brought the union forward with unity and purpose."

One of John White's central contributions has been his capacity to maintain the focus on leading the trade union while never losing sight of the broader horizon. While paying careful attention to the quotidian trade union issues concerning pay and conditions of service, John has always recognized the importance of professional education and the development of the discipline of teaching. He has consistently shown himself open to innovation, creativity and experimentation in the classroom. Keeping a balance between educational well-being *and* the well-being of teachers, and seeing the two as inextricably linked, has been a hallmark of his tenure. As John said himself in his address to the Centenary Education Conference of the ASTI last month: "The best way to defend our terms and conditions of employment is by providing a quality education to our pupils." He believes passionately in the pursuit of the public good.

John has also been a driving force behind the strengthening of a partnership across all the teacher unions in Ireland and has set out a vision for closer co-operation between the unions involved in education. Such a partnership, he says can best advance in our society "a powerful voice for academic freedom, learning and culture." I think it is fair to say that John sees the current crisis as an opportunity for us to reflect on the kind of society we want to live in and to bring the values of social cohesion and public good back to centre stage. This broader political vision is rooted in John's own pedagogical understanding: "we believe the emotional, social and personal attributes are central to human well-being and thus are central to education and central to the social good." In this he echoes the words of the Nobel Laureate, Joseph Stiglitz, who argued on a recent visit to Dublin that it is inappropriate to measure well being by GDP measures alone. We must pay attention to people's lived experiences in the broader social context.

Addressing the Centenary Conference of the ASTI Seamus Heaney remarked that "education has a unique role to play in the creation and maintenance of social solidarity and enduring social values." John White as a teacher, an educationalist and a Trade Union leader has shown a remarkable commitment to affirming and progressing that cause. As a robust defender of their rights he has earned the trust of the teachers that he represents. He has brought a renewed sense of purpose and unity to the Association of Teachers of Ireland, in this its centenary year.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis, hunc meum filium quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Arte Paedeutica, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.