



**FAILED:** Education Minister Peter Weir continually refused to budge, maintaining transfer tests would go ahead, until four days before the first exam was due to take place

# Scrap transfer test and overhaul post primary education system

**P**ETER Weir is a minister who has managed the almost impossible task of uniting all sections of society in Northern Ireland against him, and has once again shown he is a man not up to making difficult decisions.

While I'm sure he's an affable enough bloke, his tenure as minister has been nothing short of disastrous.

When we first started hearing rumblings about the coronavirus, it seemed initially like a health story, albeit a huge health story. However, it quickly became clear that this went beyond that to every section of our lives.

Getting education right throughout this time was every bit as key as ensuring there were enough hospital beds, because the children of 2020/21 are going to be the generation who are left to rebuild and repair the future damage this crisis has caused.

Decisions as to when to close schools, when to reopen them, how to facilitate online learning, ensuring safety of vulnerable children, making sure staff needed on the front line had access to childcare usually provided by the school day, keeping teachers, assistants and other school staff safe while keeping schools open for as long as possible, was a delicate balancing act that required decisions made with urgency and bravery.

The dithering of Minister Weir has been frustrating to watch and damaging to the confidence of parents and pupils. The fiasco last year in relation to the GCSE and A Level results was a steep learning curve for all the devolved regions.

Being hit with such big decision in the early days of the pandemic resulted in mistakes being made, understandably so.

However, to still be making the same mistakes almost a year later is inexcusable. Concerns have been raised by teachers and parents about the viability of the transfer test for months now. Yet Peter Weir continually refused to budge, maintaining the tests would go ahead, until four days before the first exam was due to take place. The late Martin McGuinness announced

Allison MORRIS



the end of the 11-plus in 2002, it was a unilateral decision that was made without the backing of the executive at the time or the support of the powerful grammar school lobby.

My experience of the 11-plus is different to many but also not unique. I passed despite being at an economic disadvantage, living during a time of systemic discrimination of the nationalist community in almost all aspects of life meant an education provided the only chance of being treated fairly. The fact that one unfair selection system helped me battle against an unfair political system is not something that we should be aspiring to in 2021.

But what replaced the 11-plus was much worse in terms of singling out children with no access to expensive tutoring and online learning tools. It was more stressful, having to travel to sit the exam in unfamiliar surroundings.

If this time leaves any positive legacy then it should be the scrapping of the transfer test and a fairer way to stream our children to make sure they reach their full potential.

*If this time leaves any positive legacy then it should be the scrapping of the transfer test and a fairer way to stream our children to make sure they reach their full potential*

And this is where my views on academic selection differ from some who want it scrapped completely.

The English comprehensive system failed poorer children in a much more dramatic way than the 11-plus ever did. It pushed up house prices around desirable schools, children were not all schooled together, the tradition of fee-charging schools ensures affluence buys privilege and the gap between rich and poor is huge.

When we say all children are equal that should be true but isn't, by virtue of a postcode lottery of birth thousands of children are at a disadvantage in life before they take their first breath.

Fixing that should have come before scrapping selection and attempting to create a utopian system with no pre planning or infrastructure.

As any teacher or parent with more than one child will tell you, they are not all the same. They have different strengths, different talents, different passions, different aspirations, they like different clothes, different music, different food, some are extrovert, some introvert, some like art others like maths, some like football, others excel at science.

At post-primary age it is impossible to know what subjects a child is going to love, what subjects they'll constantly ace and what ones they'll struggle with.

Most parents will send their child to the school where they think they will do best, both in terms of their education and their happiness – that's it, that's the bottom line.

It doesn't need to be a school with a fancy wool blazer that requires an entrance exam, but it does need to be one that values their child's education and isn't just used to fulfil a legal requirement until they're old enough to be kicked out in the world with limited options.

The transfer test needs scrapped, but that must be done in conjunction with an overhaul of our system of post-primary education so we're not making the problem worse instead of better. And let's be honest, that's not going to happen under Peter Weir's watch.

## ON THIS DAY

JANUARY 7 1921

### 'Worst Form of Partition'

AS amended, re-amended and revised by one-sixth of the English House of Commons, the text of the Government of Ireland Act, 1920 fills 81 pages. Section Two of Clause 76 reads: 'The Government of Ireland Act [the Third Home Rule Act of 1914] is hereby repealed as from the passing of this Act'. Thus the main object of the authors of the new Act was accomplished when the King's signature was affixed to it.

The revised Partition Act is worse than the original proposals – if it is possible to discriminate between the vileness of the first atrocity and the last. Partition on a permanent basis is provided far more ingeniously than the framers of the Bill contemplated. As the main provisions of the Act are familiar to everyone, we need not dwell on its shortcomings – apart from the vital issue of Partition which it raises at once. The British government can plunder this country more thoroughly and securely than ever... once the Act comes into operation. The cost of establishing the worthless two Assemblies – especially the expense attending the foundation of entirely new legal and administrative systems in this corner of Ireland – must necessarily be crushing...

What directly concerns all Ireland is the effect of this mad and criminal gamble in political chicanery on the future of their common country – socially, economically, politically and nationally. Edmund Burke, in famous phrases, described the Penal Code of Laws [passed by the Ascendancy-based Irish Parliament after 1691] in the following terms in 1792:

"It was a complete system, full of coherence and consistency... It was a machine of wise and elaborate contrivance and as well fitted for the oppression, impoverishment and degradation of a people, and the debasement of them... as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man."

Burke's words can be truly applied to the Government of Ireland Act, 1920. It has been designed to succeed where the Penal Code failed – to disrupt and destroy the historic nation which had survived and triumphed over its enemies during a struggle of 750 years.

(For Joe Devlin, Nationalist MP and chairman of the *Irish News*, the darkening shadow of partition and perpetual Unionist rule seemed unreal. A decade earlier, the 400,000 northern Nationalists, in common with Nationalist Ireland, had confidently expected an all-Ireland Home Rule Parliament within the empire. For Devlin, the 1920 Act, establishing a Unionist-controlled parliament without minority safeguards meant 'permanent partition' and permanent minority status for northern Catholics. For a decade more the rival sections nationalism – Republican and constitutionalist – would blame each other as well as De Valera and Collins for their fate.)

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX  
e.phoenix@irishnews.com