

**Speech by Barney McNeany, Acting Commissioner, at the  
Democra School, Schools Council Event – 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2006**

Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen and to all the Young People in the audience.

Can I welcome you all this morning to Oxford Island?

I'd also like to thank all of the contributors for today and the partners to this event from schools and education boards and from the department for education.

This morning marks a significant event in the work of the office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People – a major stepping stone.

In this short speech I want to tell you why I think it's so important. And children and young people please note – it will be a short speech otherwise a big hook comes out of the ceiling and Deborah does her magic disappearing act!

Firstly, I think the reason we are here today – how to build a Schools Council and how to make it work well - is a great way of making sure children and young people have their say in decisions that affect their lives. School is an important place for most children and young people and its where most of them spend a lot of their time learning, not just about the subjects they are taught but learning how to be a citizen and a member of our society.

Now we in NICCY are very interested in hearing what young people think.

That's why, in 2004, we asked a team from Queens University in Belfast to find



out the most important and the most difficult things in children and young people's lives in Northern Ireland. 1064 children and young people from 25 schools across Northern Ireland helped the team from Queen's University. They did this by talking to them, drawing pictures of their experiences, writing stories about what happened in their lives and making posters.

Some of the posters you will see around the room today and some are on the display as I speak.

Now some people would say that asking kids about school would be the same as asking turkeys about Christmas. You know the result you are going to get before you ask the question and pass the cranberry sauce please!

However the Queen's University Team were told by all the children and young people involved in their work that the **number one issue** they considered **most unfair about school** was **not having a say** in decisions affecting their school life.

This is despite the law that requires schools to talk to and listen to children and young people when they are making policies for how schools deal with bullying or how schools treat children and young people when they break the rules. (For the adults in the audience that's the Education and Libraries 2003 Order). But the fact is children and young people don't feel they are being listened to in all schools, although I am sure that is not the case in any of the schools here today?

Now some of the things children and young people feel are unfair about school need to be there. For example they complained about the rules or school uniforms. Sometimes, even though we might not want it, we all must do stuff we



don't like, even as Adults. That's one of the reasons why I'm up here making a speech today and not Nigel Williams.

But I believe, as the minister Angela Smith said, that when you take the time to explain, where you feel part of the process of making the decision, even if you don't like the outcome, it's a much better process.

And the Queen's team found many of the issues raised by children and young people were to do with not having a say in sport or recreational activities, about a lack of facilities and poor school buildings, no say in subject choices and dirty and vandalised toilets. I'm not sure many adults would be happy with any of these issues either.

Now NICCY is not alone in being interested in how children and young people have a say in decisions that affect their lives because the United Nations – the club that all the countries in the world belong to – also recognises that children and young people should have their say – that they have a right to be listened to.

They have told us that in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – the UNCRC. The best way I can explain the UNCRC is that it is really a list of 42 promises made to children by all the countries in the world - including the United Kingdom and Ireland. Number 12 on this list – Article 12 of the UNCRC – gives all children and young people the right to express their views freely and for them to be listened to by others.

Now in NICCY government has asked us to keep reminding them of their promises to children and young people – and that is why we asked the Minister for Education to speak to you today – to remind her of the promise made by the



government to children and young people that they have a right to have their say.

That is why we think today is a big stepping stone to making that happen.

Before I finish I want to tell you about one other reason why I think today is so important – and it's linked to the theme of today - **democracy**. In Northern Ireland we are lucky to live in a system where, by and large and most of the time, if you don't like what politicians do you can vote for someone else and see if they do a better job. And sorry Angela but I hope we will soon see the politicians we voted for locally, here in Northern Ireland, back in charge at Stormont and, by the way, so do the current Ministers, including Angela Smith.

But where do children and young people learn to vote and to take part in this process. Now some children and young people see their parents voting, talking about politics and get interested. Some don't. Most don't.

At the 2005 elections only **4 young people out of every 10** aged between 18 to 24 years voted.

And in 2004 only **nine people out of 456** – that's **only 2%** - under the age of 30 were appointed to Boards of government agencies – for example - the Education and Library Boards.

What's the point of me telling you about these figures?

To let you know that unless we start to get you the young people of Northern Ireland interested in and working in our democracy soon no young person will



vote and no one under 30 will be helping to make important decisions around here.

That would be a very sad problem to face and one NICCY wants to help make sure never happens. That's why we were so keen to work today with colleagues from schools and boards and the department for education to make this stepping stone – the schools councils stepping stone - as a start to try to make sure children and young people have a full say in decisions that affect their lives both in schools and hopefully later in their lives in the democratic process.

I think it is only with the full involvement of young people that we can make our political system work to the max and I believe schools councils will provide a good start for young people in the most fundamental right in a democracy – the right to vote.

Ladies and Gentlemen and children and young people I hope you have a great day and I know you will enjoy the event we have lined up for you,

Thank You.

