

Comment

Posh parents are spoiling the Hot School Meals scheme for plain people of Ireland

FIONNÁN
SHEAHAN



The young fella at home has become one of the plain people of Ireland who eats their dinner in the middle of the day.

A turf war breaks out between Kerry, Galway and Mayo when the origin of that aphorism comes up. It is most closely associated with Jackie Healy-Rae. When the late Kerry South TD was first elected to the Dáil, he was being interviewed on RTÉ by the august Brian Farrell, who asked him who he represented. “The plain people of Ireland,” Healy-Rae responded. “And who are these people?” the late broadcaster probed. “The people who eat their dinner in the middle of the day,” the Independent TD replied.

His son, Danny Healy-Rae, employed the phrase a few years ago during a Dáil discussion on Covid-19 restrictions on pubs. “Most of the people I represent eat their dinner in the middle of the day,” he said. Little has changed, so, for the Kingdom’s indefatigable dynasty.

Here’s where the Galway crowd come in, though – they credit the late Fianna Fáil junior minister Mark Killilea Jr with coining the phrase. Not to be left out, the Mayo lads say the late John Healy, the influential journalist with the *Western People* and the *Irish Times*, surmised that Ireland was divided between those who ate their dinner in the middle of the day and those who didn’t. As an aside, “John Healy” was, of course, also the original name of one Jackie Healy-Rae.

The multilayered maxim about when you eat your dinner pits the traditional rural pragmatist against the modernist urban trend-follower.

But it also conveys a sense that the cute rural fella has his dinner early as he’s been up since the crack of dawn working away while the city slicker is a slower starter.

Regardless, a whole new generation of young people who eat their dinner in the middle of the day is being created with the rollout of the Hot School Meals scheme. But the programme also seems to have become a new front line in the culture wars.

From a small start of less than 40 Deis schools in disadvantaged areas seven years ago, the programme is now available to every primary school in the country. Well over half-a-million primary schoolkids can now get a hot dinner – a mighty achievement.

The multiple merits of the programme range from ensuring less well-off children get a solid meal, through to taking the hassle out of sending in a lunch box each day with no guarantee of the contents being eaten. Providing meals to children has been shown to increase attendance and improve concentration.

The scheme is now costing €300m a year. Money well spent, given the societal benefits – or so you’d think. According to the coalition party responsible for bringing in the scheme, and now in charge of the Exchequer, well over half of parents are objecting to the meals.

“More than two out of every five respondents (43pc) said that they are planning to continue to avail of the hot school meal scheme in its



The negative response to the free school meals programme is typical of Ireland’s current culture of entitlement. Photo: Getty

‘Fine for the parents who home-cook their roasted free-range quail, with olives stuffed with foie gras and organic quinoa salad. But the whole purpose of the rollout was to ensure no stigma was attached to the free meals’

current format,” says a Fine Gael survey of 8,000 parents. Well, that presumably means the other 57pc are so unhappy with the service they are intending to drop out.

Fine Gael’s “survey” also found “the majority of parents send in a home-prepared lunch as an additional option”.

“Parents are also very critical of how the food is presented and the nutritional content of the food and there are also concerns about the origin of ingredients, including meat.”

And it goes on: “Three-quarters of the respondents reported their children do not enjoy the variety of food.”

Now, Fine Gael doesn’t have a demographic breakdown of the survey respondents, but you can hazard a guess at the class of people who replied.

Notably, Fine Gael was not carrying out surveys on the programme when it was only going into disadvantaged areas. Since the scheme was rolled out to the middle classes, though, and it suddenly affected its voters, the party is going around stirring up apathy.

Nobody is saying the Hot School Meals scheme is perfect, nor that substandard food should be served to a child from any socio-economic background. But nor is gruel being served in a workhouse to Oliver Twist.

The Fine Gael report also highlights how “recent public debate” is decreasing demand for the scheme, as “negative publicity and rhetoric around the scheme is... leading some parents

to opt out.” And that’s fine if some posh parents want to home-cook their roasted free-range quail, with olives stuffed with foie gras and organic quinoa salad for their child’s dinner. But don’t spoil it for the plain people of Ireland who appreciate the effort.

The whole purpose of the universal rollout was to ensure there was no stigma attached to eating the free meals. Ideally, you’d have modern kitchens in every school where meals would be cooked on site using locally sourced ingredients.

But this scheme has to serve every part of the country, from the large urban school with 500 pupils to the small rural school with a dozen kids. The negative response to the scheme from some is rather typical of a culture of entitlement where there is little appreciation for the range of services the State is now providing.

The conclusions of the Fine Gael report by Senator Linda Nelson Murray are all worthy enough, and nobody would quibble with improvements like enhancing nutritional value, offering a cold option and providing better canteen facilities in schools. But further investment in the scheme is dependent upon parents placing a value on the programme – not just abandoning it.

To borrow another Healyism – from the Mayo John not the Kerry Jackie: “You know the Achill man’s grace after meals? ‘Thanks for the next – we’re sure of this.’” Eaten bread is soon forgotten all right, but tomorrow’s meal is what matters.