**Presentation by Pat Burke to the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection**

I would like to begin by thanking the Committee for the opportunity to meet with you today. I propose to briefly outline my own background, give my perspective on the work of the State Examinations Commission and then set out some of the challenges facing the Commission over the next number of years.

By way of personal introduction, I think that I can fairly be described as a lifetime public servant. My time as a civil servant involved service with the Revenue Commissioners before spending some 20 years with the Department of Education and Skills as Assistant Secretary General.

Over that period, I have had responsibility for the State Examinations when these were a function of the Department prior to the establishment of the State Examinations Commission in 2003. Indeed, I take a particular pride in having led reforms such as that of allowing Leaving Certificate students to view their marked scripts. Strange to say that something which is now an embedded part of the system was, at the time, a major and, indeed, controversial initiative in transparency. My time in the Department of Education and Skills has also involved responsibility for second level education, curriculum and assessment policy and industrial relations. I have had extensive involvement with corporate governance issues and risk management. I also had a lead role in the establishment of the State Examinations Commission and the National Council for Special Education in 2003.

I think that it is fair to say that the State Examinations system in Ireland is something of a national institution. It touches upon the lives of some 120,000 students each year and by extension their families, teachers and friends. For young adults, the Leaving Certificate is seen as a rite of passage from school days to adulthood. The sheer volume of media coverage over the weeks of the examinations bears testimony to the degree of public interest they attract.

It is also true to say that the examinations system is, by any standards, a massive logistical undertaking. It involves not only 120,000 candidates but also 5,000 superintendents, 7,000 examiners and virtually 2m individual test instruments.

The examinations system is built upon public trust and confidence. Maintaining this trust and confidence is essential and will continue to require a constant striving for excellence in delivery coupled with unfailing integrity and candour in dealing with any problems which arise.

The State Examinations Commission does not operate in a vacuum. The examinations themselves are a partnership exercise involving many parties including school management, parent associations and teacher unions. As many of the issues in areas such as curriculum development and transition to third level education must be approached on a joined up basis, it is essential that the State Examinations Commission work collaboratively with bodies such as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and third level institutions.

My fellow Commissioners and I will oversee a challenging agenda over the next three years. In that respect, I feel that the incoming Board of the State Examinations Commission has a very strong and varied combination of talents. Mary Ryan, the Deputy Chair, has extensive experience as a school principal and brings that important perspective to the State Examinations Commission. Richard Thorn is a former Director of Sligo Institute of Technology with a particular appreciation of the significance of the State Examinations from a third level viewpoint. Teresa O’Doherty as Dean of Education at Mary Immaculate College will bring vital educational insights to the group. David McGarry as Chief Finance Officer of the Shannon Development Group has a strong background in financial and corporate governance matters which will prove invaluable.

We will need all of the available talents of the new Board and most particularly the Chief Executive Officer and his dedicated staff in meeting the challenges ahead. These include ensuring the quality of the system and by extension maintaining public confidence. It will also be necessary to adapt the system to meet changes arising from initiatives such as Junior Cycle reform and changes to the Leaving Cert grading structure. A particular challenge will be to continue to exploit technology to bring greater efficiency and enhance quality. Examples of this will include greater use of online facilities in areas such as fee payment, appeal application, contract staff recruitment and on-line marking.

On my own behalf and on behalf of my fellow Commissioners I want to assure the Committee of our strong commitment and dedication to this vitally important task in the years ahead.