



PRIVATE MEMBERS MOTION ON CARERS

ADDRESS BY

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Before dealing with the Motion before the House, I would like to take this opportunity to set out, through some personal remarks, my approach and philosophy to delivering a welfare system and social services support system that will reach out to include all who need and deserve our assistance.

Most of us are fortunate enough to have reaped the benefits of living in an Ireland that has witnessed great surges in economic growth in recent years.

Our economic performance has allowed us to tackle many of the social and economic issues that in the past scarred this country's reputation as a place of care and refuge.

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As I have regularly stated, we must keep up that sturdy economic growth by encouraging expansion in business, more profitable companies and greater competitiveness.

As we have seen in recent days, all predictions are that the economy will continue to grow impressively for some years.

This is, of course, good news.

But its true benefits will only be seen if the fruits of this economic growth percolates through to benefit all, and not just the few.

Our economic progress is not intended to make millionaires of the few, while many others face a daily struggle.

We can all of us only be proud of a booming economy and a vibrant modern country if it reaches out and lifts those who, for whatever reason, have been left behind and feel most vulnerable.

Sean Lemass famously assessed the benefits of a growing economy by saying that a rising tide lifts all boats.

In today's Ireland, the economic tide is rising ever higher each year.

But in the great swell of profits, new opportunities and high expectations, the tide has not lifted all who need our help.

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That is why, as Minister for Social Affairs, I am determined to tackle the areas where people have been left behind.

Resources will be targeted on helping those most in need or most deserving.

I think of the thousands of carer's throughout the country who selflessly sacrifice so much of their lives to look after loved ones:

the older people who were central in the building of the new Ireland and the Celtic Tiger and now want to spend the twilight years in security and comfort:

the widows and widowers who have had to face many difficulties

and the many, many more who feel left at the margins of society and look to the State for a helping hand.

These are the type of welfare issues we will be targeting, first in the Budget and then into the future.

Only when the rising tide lifts all the boats can we be proud of our performance as a modern, caring nation.

Now to deal with the Motion.

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As we are all too well aware, the increase in the number of older people as a proportion of the population presents both challenges and opportunities to Irish society. As we age we aspire to live at home in dignity in our own community. The same aspiration applies to people with disabilities. Our challenge is to provide services for older people and people with disabilities when and where these services are needed and to tailor these services to the individual's need.

This Government has been committed to supporting carers and care in the community for well over a decade.

My colleagues in Opposition have called on the Government to recognise the value of our carers contribution to society. I say to them that this Government's recognition of the value of carers work is evident in these three irrefutable facts:

1. Expenditure on carers payments increased by 310% from EUR 46.36 million in 1997 to EUR 190.2 million at the end of last year.
2. The number of carers receiving Carer's Allowance is up by almost 142% since the Government took office in 1997 now at 22,300.
3. The Carer's Allowance has been increased by EUR 68.28 (76%) for those over 66 and by EUR 50.08 (56%) for those under 66 over the last seven Budgets.

If this has not banished any doubts over the Government's commitment to carers from your minds, you may want to consider these specific measures and innovations which this Government has implemented during our years in office.

- In April this year, the weekly income disregards increased to EUR 250 for a single carer and to EUR 500 for a couple. The effect of this increase ensures that a couple with two children, earning a joint income of up to EUR 29,328 qualify for

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the maximum rate of Carer's Allowance while the same couple, if they have an income of EUR 46,384 can still qualify for the minimum Carer's Allowance, the Free Schemes and the Respite Care Grant.

- The annual Respite Care Grant which was introduced in 1999 has increased to EUR 835 from June this year. The amount of this Grant has increased by a massive 229% over five successive Budgets. In addition, carers caring for more than one person receive a double respite care grant of EUR 1,670 in recognition of the particular difficulties they face.
- This represents an increase of over 550% on what the same carers would have received five years ago.
- The Carer's Benefit and Carer's Leave schemes were introduced in Budget 2002. These arrangements provide financial support and allow carers to avail of a job protected leave of absence for a period of up to 15 months.
- The net result of these measures is that over 55 per cent of the 40,500 carers, as estimated by the CSO to be caring for more than 6 hours per day, are in receipt of a specific carer's payment from my Department.

This Government will deliver much, much more for carers. The long term care agenda is a very important aspect of social policy with major financial and other implications and I am determined, together with my colleague the Minister for Health and Children, to move this agenda on by developing a realistic and achievable framework for the future of long term care in this country.

International studies suggest that healthy life expectancy, that is, the number of years of life that will be free of chronic illness or disability, is increasing.

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Furthermore, improvements in technology will enable older people and people with disabilities to live independently for longer.

Traditionally, older people and people with disabilities have been cared for informally, in the home, by women. Increasing participation of women in the labour force will lead to a decline in the numbers of women available to provide care. In addition, the decline in family sizes means that there are fewer offspring to provide care.

A range of studies indicate that older people would prefer to receive care in their own homes and communities. The challenge is to put in place a benefit system and a financing system which meets people's needs and is sustainable.

In order to address some of these issues, during the summer my Department circulated a consultation document on the Study to Examine the Future Financing of Long term Care in Ireland, which my predecessor launched last year. This document aims to focus interested parties on the specific complex issues must be addressed in the policy development process. These issues include benefit design, delivery, cost and financing, which are discussed at length in the report. The document has been circulated to over 70 interested parties including the Oireachtas Committees on Government departments, health boards, the social partners and interest groups representing carers, older people and people with disabilities.

My officials are currently compiling the feedback from the consultation process and this will be the starting point for the Working Group promised in 'Sustaining Progress'. I intend to establish this Working Group before the end of this year.

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Parallel with this consultation, the ESRI is carrying out a telephone survey on behalf of my Department. The objective of the survey is to explore public attitudes and views on issues related to provision and funding of long term care of the elderly.

With regard to the report of the Joint Committee on Social and Family Affairs on 'The Position of Full Time Carers', I would like to congratulate the Committee on this insight into the needs of carers which it obtained from talking to a range of interested parties.

I was most interested to read in the Committee's report that 'the greatest need identified by family carers is the need for a break from caring, in home respite and respite for the dependent person'. I have already spoke of the Respite Care Grant paid by my Department to all carers in receipt of Carer's Allowance and Carer's Benefit. I will consider the further improvements in this Grant scheme recommended by the Joint Committee in the context of the forthcoming Budget.

I also noted that one of the recommendations of the Joint Committee relating to my Department pertains to improvements in the information available to carers. In this regard, funding of EUR 18,000 has been provided to the Carer's Association towards the publication and distribution of a new information pack which will provide information about services and supports for carers and their families.

I should also inform my colleagues that my officials are carrying out a review of the Carer's Allowance and Carer's Benefit schemes within the Department. It will consider many of the issues and recommendations raised by the Joint Committee on Social and Family Affairs in their report on 'The Position of Full Time Carers'. The

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review is nearing completion and its recommendations will be considered in the context of Budget 2005.

Government policy is strongly in favour of supporting care in the community and enabling people to remain in their own homes for as long as possible. The development of the range of supports available to carers will continue to be a priority for this Government and, building on the foundations now in place, we will continue to develop the types of services which recognise the value of the caring ethos and which provide real support and practical assistance to people who devote their time to improving the quality of life for others.

ENDS