

Ministers Speeches



SPEECH BY

THE MINISTER FOR SOCIAL AND FAMILY AFFAIRS

SÉAMUS BRENNAN T.D.

AT THE CONFERENCE ENTITLED

"BEING A FATHER AT CHRISTMAS"

ORGANISED BY AMEN

PLAZA HOTEL, TALLAGHT
9th DECEMBER, 2004

NB: CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Ministers Speeches



Ladies and gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to be here today to formally open this Conference "Being a Father at Christmas" being organised by AMEN. I would like to thank AMEN and in particular Mary Cleary for their invitation.

The theme of the Conference-"Being a Father at Christmas"- is in every sense timely. All around us we can see that the celebration of Christmas is well underway. It is a time that generates many and varied emotions. Primarily, Christmas is a time for families, a time when children take centre stage and a time when fathers and mothers, sons and daughters will travel thousands of miles to be reunited as a family.

As many of you here today know all too well from personal experience, Christmas is a particularly difficult time for fathers who, for whatever reason, are unable to see their children or gain access to them. If these fathers can get to see and meet their children it is often in restricted circumstances. One can only image the emotions that swirl around for these fathers at Christmas. You have hope mingling with regret. Memories of happier times clouded by the events or circumstances that led eventually to this unfortunate situation.

I did not come here today with a Santa bag of solutions. This is the real world and the issues involved are complex and emotive. It will take time, patience, honesty and solid and sensible reforms. The Department of Social Affairs will play its part in this process.

Yesterday, in the Dáil, I spoke about the role of the Department and of the need for it to regularly monitor the pulse of our changing society and to be in a position to respond to those changes.

My approach as Minister is to encourage the delivery of a social and welfare system that is shaped to meet the needs of the individual, rather than being guided by rules and regulations that can sometimes blur the real purpose. What it means in simple terms is that one-size welfare does not fit all.

Ministers Speeches



On the changing role of fathers, I am sure many of you will be familiar with the recent launch of the Report “Strengthening Families through Fathers” which was commissioned under the Families Research Programme administered by my Department. I said at the launch of this publication that we should be re-examining our attitudes to fathers and their role in the family.

The research study showed that men need to be directly included in the assessments of their capabilities as fathers unless there were very good reasons to exclude them. It was found that, typically, younger fatherhood was unplanned. However, this certainly does not mean that it is always unwanted. Indeed, it was shown that most of the men featured in the study were delighted when they found out they were going to be fathers.

Another interesting point to emerge from the study was the obstacles that some of the younger fathers had to overcome in order to remain involved, obstacles that were placed in front of them by family and professional agencies.

As I have stated, this outlook needs to change. We should be putting in place means by which young men are encouraged to get involved with their partner and child, not deterrents to prevent them becoming a part of their child’s life.

A large sample of the men who took part in the research spoke of the exclusion they felt by the family law system, which they saw as sexist and anti-father. They said that for them this has led to very restrictive access for these fathers to their children which in turn threatens the relationships they have with their children. The children in these cases spoke honestly of their desire to have relationships with their fathers.

We need to ensure that the system does not, as a matter of routine, discriminate against fathers when the issue of custody is being addressed. Care needs to be taken that each case is treated separately and on its own merits.

As Minister with responsibility for Family Affairs, I am committed to developing a clear, coherent, comprehensive and integrated strategy on supports for families across all relevant policy areas. The strategy is taking shape under the guidance of

Ministers Speeches



an Inter-Departmental Committee of senior civil servants that has been working on it since July. The final report will be published early in 2005.

I would like to take this opportunity to spell out some of the specific aims of that strategic process:

The main aim is to have families and family life recognised as a distinct policy area in its own right, and not just a focus of policy for a range of other areas such as income support, health etc. Of course this will have a number of consequences.

In the first instance there will be an analysis of the trends in the development of families and family life, and the major challenges these pose for policies to support and strengthen families. I can assure you that the strategy will be developed to meet these challenges, taking full account of the key trends.

The strategy will comprise objectives and targets and will be structured from a family perspective. It will include a number of core central elements:

It will address the need for continuity and stability in family life - relating to preparation for marriage, supporting the maintenance of continuous and stable relationships, and assisting couples who experience relationship difficulties via counselling, family mediation etc., particularly the type of services provided by the Family Support Agency.

It will look carefully at parenting - relating to supports needed by couples to have the desired number of children, and in rearing and educating their children to adulthood. This will cover such areas as family friendly employment, income support, child care, health care, housing and accommodation.

It must address the issue of care for other family members - this will mainly deal with the supports to be provided to families in caring for family members other than children, mainly older people and people with disabilities.

Needless to say in the light of what I have said, I can assure you that the strategy will have a particular focus on how greater supports can be provided to enable all

Ministers Speeches



fathers to have much greater involvement in the parenting of their children. In doing so, careful note will be taken of the views expressed at this seminar and those expressed by groups such as AMEN.

Finally, I am delighted that my Department was able to support this important conference through the special awards scheme to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the UN International Year of the Family. I can assure you that seminars such as these play a vital role in promoting awareness of family-related issues and the outcomes will play a part in the integrated family strategy.

I would like to take the opportunity to pay tribute to Mary Cleary and AMEN. I know Mary and her group have been providing an excellent service for a number of years now, including a helpline, advice, support and legal information, support group meetings and networking men with others in similar circumstances. I know that they also provide a contact centre and outings for men and their children, personal development and assertiveness courses for men and family law courses.

Once more, I thank you for your kind invitation to be here today. I look forward to receiving a report of the outcome of the Conference in due course. I would like now to formally open the conference.

Ends