



Extracts From Speech

**By Séamus Brennan, T.D.,
Minister For Social Affairs,**

at Treoir Conference

“Co-Parenting – The New Challenge”

10th October 2006

**Conference Centre
Croke Park**

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- ***Minister Promises Legislation Soon On Major Reforms for Over 80,000 Lone Parents***
 - ***Seamus Brennan-“Reforms Will be Back Up by Increased Access to Affordable Childcare, Education & Training***
 - ***Cohabitation Rule Is Restrictive & Has No Place in Social Policy in 21st Century Ireland***
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The Ireland of today, as you point out in your conference brochure, is a very different place to what it was when your organisation was set up. Today we have close to full employment with a workforce of over 2 million and an economy that continues to grow at a rate that makes us the envy of most other countries, in Europe and further afield. The Ireland of today is confident, cosmopolitan, vibrant and full of opportunity. But our phenomenal success has come at a price. Maybe, as the great writer John McGahern said shortly before his death, "We have become accustomed to living with our poverty, but we have not yet learned to live with our wealth."

The reality is that inside a relatively few years our expectations have soared. The pace of life has become increasingly frantic. The pressures on family life, on parenting, are resulting in profound changes in society. The erosion of crucial family and community networks is making it more difficult for people to maintain strong and stable relationships. Separation and divorce, while thankfully not at levels in other countries, are nonetheless on the increase.

Children above all benefit from stability and continuity in their family life and from a regular and close relationship with both parents. The changing nature of family life in Ireland today has by its nature led to a greater role for the state. Many of the issues affecting co-parenting, including access and custody and guardianship, are the responsibility of the Family Courts. I know that Treoir have many excellent publications dealing with many of these sensitive areas. A recent very positive development has been the appointment of a family law reporter in a one-year pilot project which will break new ground in the Irish legal system.

The right of a child to know and as far as possible to be cared for by his or her parents is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which Ireland ratified in 1992. My colleague the Minister for Children has been very involved in seeing that we are in compliance with the terms of the convention. For my part, a key policy in this area is in the support of lone parents which is done primarily through the One Parent Family Payment. Lone parenthood has increased dramatically since Treoir was setting up 30 years ago. Today there are some 80,000 lone parents, with 130,000 children, in receipt of One Parent Family Payment from



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my Department. These lone parents represent many differing ages, education and employment backgrounds, and include single, separated, divorced and widowed lone parents. Lone parents are a valuable resource and I am determined that they should be given every support and encouragement. Behind the statistics are very real lives, day-to-day pressures, lives given to providing the best for children and lives searching for greater fulfilment.

As you know, earlier this year, I published a Government discussion paper "Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents" which addressed the social exclusion and risk of poverty faced by many such families and their children. This report represents the most comprehensive review of the welfare of lone parents undertaken for many years. The proposals put forward are in some cases complex and others could be considered radical in nature. At the very core of all of these proposals is the reforming of restrictive social policies in the area of Lone Parents and low income families.

In essence the report searches for solutions to the problems confronting lone parents, their children and other families on low incomes, in areas such as access to employment, education and training, income supports, childcare, child maintenance payments, cohabitation rules and grossly unfair stereotyping. It is also about pointing the way towards solutions, towards new opportunities and greater fulfillment for lone parents and towards better lives and prospects for their children. The reforms are about introducing more enlightened social policies that directly target and benefit the lives of tens of thousands of people, especially children, who are for the most part caught in restrictive poverty traps.

We have a responsibility to use the income support system, as proposed in the Government Discussion Paper and wider welfare supports, to address the problems behind those income needs. We also have a responsibility to confront the social issues and pressures that blunt fulfilment and curb aspirations. One of the proposed reforms, and one that I know is of particular interest to Treoir having met with them over the past couple of years, is the ending of the cohabitation rules. Rules that say the parents of a child or children cannot live together as a family, free from the



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current restrictive arrangement that has State inspectors checking on them. In 21st century Ireland, that is no longer acceptable social policy.

Reform must also be about re examining our attitudes to some fathers and their role in the family, issues such as easier access to their children. And reforms must also look at better and more direct ways of ensuring that fathers contribute through maintenance child support payments to the raising of their children.

With regard to cases of joint custody, the payment will continue to be made to the parent who has main care and charge of the child. In situations where parents are separated, payment can be made to the two parents where there is more than one child and they are living with different parents. In instances where there is joint equal custody of a child, then under the proposals one allowance would be payable (who it is payable to, to be decided upon by the parents themselves/through the courts/or through family mediation). This would be an improvement on the situation which has existed up to now.

I am committed to bringing forward in the not too distant future proposals for legislation that will have at its core the introduction of more enlightened social policy that will set about opening up genuine choices and opportunities for lone parents. Maintaining adequate income supports, and where possible improving them, will be a central plank in progressing these important and necessary reforms.

However, income is only one of the necessary supports to ensure this reform is successful – as the lone parent groups, including Treoir have highlighted to me. Access to affordable childcare and education and training are the other three vital legs of this reform platform and I can assure you that complementary implementation plans in these three areas are currently being developed.

There are a number of other issues surrounding co-parenting, family life and the rearing of children that also need to be examined, some as part of these reforms and others through the involvement of other Government Departments and Agencies. For instance, I do not believe it is the role of the social welfare income support system to involve itself in decisions regarding the amount of time a child spends with its



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parents and the splitting of payments accordingly. It is something that may best be dealt with through other more appropriate channels, for example, family mediation and the involvement of the Family Support Agency.

One of the main issues to be resolved in the cases of couples with children is how to parent the children following on from the separation. The Family Mediation Service run by the Family Support Agency is a free, professional and confidential service that helps the separating parents to draw up a parenting plan which will help both themselves and their children through the difficult times ahead. The important thing is that it is a parenting plan which is agreed by both parties.

In conclusion, let me say that the influence of Treoir is evident right through the whole experience of parenting in its many and varied formations. Treoir's dedication, commitment and campaigning drive over the past 30 years has helped to shape a new era of better opportunities and rights for those parenting alone, or co-parenting, and their children. You can be proud of your legacy and I look forward to working with you into the future as together we work to ensure that our social policies fully reflect the more enlightened Ireland of the 21st century.

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