

Ministers Speeches



Speech

By

Séamus Brennan TD

Minister for Social and Family Affairs

at the

Family Support Agency Conference

to mark the

10th Anniversary of the UN Year of the Family

"Supporting Families in a Changing Society"

Thursday, October 14th 2004

N.B. CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Ministers Speeches



Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to be here this morning to open this conference hosted by the Family Support Agency. It is my first time as Minister with responsibility for family affairs to address a major conference on the subject of families. It is, of course, also the last major conference in Ireland marking the 10th Anniversary of the U.N. International Year of the Family. It is very appropriate, therefore, to reflect on the theme of the Conference "Supporting Families in a Changing Society, based on the wide debates that have taken place in the course of the year, and to look forward as to how best we can support families in this time of profound change.

Ireland has been experiencing major changes, especially over the past 20 years. For the most part these have been positive especially in terms of increased employment, increased standards of living, and greatly reduced emigration – just to name some of the major ones older generations would have longed for. But these changes have also had a major impact on our basic and most cherished institution the family. This impact mostly has been positive, but it also presents major challenges as to how we can now best support families to promote the well being of family members in those changing times

The rapid rise in employment in the last few years - and in particular the greater number of women who have entered the workforce – has brought many benefits not least in greatly increasing standards of living for families.

The downside has been the difficulties being experienced in achieving a proper balance between work and family life, particularly in relation to care of children and other dependent family members. Add to this mix the changing roles of men and women, an ageing population, declining birth rates, more co-habiting couples and increasing numbers of people having to parent alone, and it becomes clear that we need to take another look at the supports for today's family needs.

To quote the Commission on the Family "*Families today have too little time for themselves, their relatives and friends, their communities - the crucial support networks on which they depend in times of family difficulty*" With the pace of life today and the erosion of these networks it has become more difficult for people to maintain strong and stable relationships. Separation and divorce, while thankfully

Ministers Speeches



not at levels in other countries, are nonetheless on the increase.

The Government established the Family Support Agency to bring together the pro-family programmes and services introduced by the Government in recent years. Its mission, as outlined in its Strategy is *to promote family and community well being through the provision of appropriate supports and services to families.*

In establishing the Agency the Government sought to provide a comprehensive and coherent approach to the future development and delivery of essential supports to families, to promote continuity and stability in family life, and to foster a supportive community for families at local level - key objectives of the Government.

Last year, Minister Coughlan consulted with the real experts in this policy field - family members - in a series of fora in all the regions of Ireland. Reports on the outcome of each of the fora have been published. A general report entitled "Families and Family Life in Ireland, Challenges for the Future" has also been published.

Organisations with an interest in family issues have been invited to submit any further comments or views on the issues raised in the Fora report and on other issues they consider relevant. These were due by the end of last month and the intention is to have them published also.

The public consultation has shown, and scientific surveys nationally and internationally have also shown, that families and family life are among the most important sources of personal well being and of value to people. The impact on families of the profound changes taking place is, therefore, a source of stress and strain as they struggle to cope. All family members are affected to a greater or lesser degree, with increasingly the most vulnerable being the young and the old.

There are many supports being provided to families by the State, but it is evident that these must be modernised to meet today's needs. Given the rapid pace of change the State system of supports will need to be structured in ways that will facilitate ongoing modernisation.

Ministers Speeches



If Government is to develop the right policy responses, greater knowledge about the issues families are facing is required.

The Commission on the Family pointed to the dearth of research into families and family members. The Families Research Programme was devised to begin to redress this lack of empirical data. Phase one of the Programme is drawing to a close with the finalisation of the remaining project.

The Government programme refers to Ireland developing a world-class research capacity, recognising the importance of encouraging a dynamic research culture. The importance of research cannot be stressed enough and I look forward to the second phase of the programme under the auspices of the Family Support Agency. In light of the realities of change in Ireland today, it is my objective as Minister for Family Affairs to develop a clear, coherent, comprehensive and integrated strategy on supports for families across all relevant policy areas.

The findings from the public consultation, the various conferences, such as this one, and many excellent reports, especially those emanating from the Families Research Programme will form key sources for the strategy. An inter-Departmental Committee has been working on the strategy since July and the aim is to have it completed before the end of this Anniversary year.

The strategic process being developed will aim 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.

This will involve a regular, ongoing 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.

A 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.

The Family Support Agency is a key element in the Government's Families First approach to policy and services development and will continue to be a significant

Ministers Speeches



resource to families in Ireland. Four key pillars on which the Agency is founded are reflected in the programme today.

These are the family mediation service, support for voluntary organization providing counselling and other family support services, the ongoing support for the Family Resource Centres and families research. Today we will look at all these supports and examine how to restore family harmony, replace confrontation with consensus, develop ongoing community supports for families and identify priorities for research.

I wish you every success with your deliberations. I look forward with interest to receiving, what promises to be, excellent papers from your distinguished speakers and to hearing the outcome of your discussions. It just remains for me to formally open the Conference and to let the proceedings begin.
ENDS