

## *A Public Service Perspective*

Address to the Association of Former Parliamentarians  
Kevin Callinan, Fórsa General Secretary

**Friday 12<sup>th</sup> April 2024**

**Scheduled for 11.50am, check against delivery**

Colleagues, I would like to start by thanking the Association of Former Parliamentarians for inviting me to speak today on this very important topic. In considering the context for this address, it seemed only fitting, as the General Secretary of Ireland's largest public service trade union and as the Chair of the Irish Congress of Trade Union's Public Services Committee, that I approach this topic from the perspective of our public services – the benefits of immigration in enriching our public services, the way in which our public services must respond to immigration, and the case for enhancing public service provision in this country.

It would be remiss of me to speak on immigration in this country and not to address Ireland's relationship with emigration across many centuries. Ireland is no stranger to emigration. Our pre-famine population stood at 8.5 million but was quickly decimated. Those who didn't perish of starvation sought new lands in which to make their lives. In unimaginably difficult circumstances, what choice did our people face? Stay in Ireland to suffer the fate of their lost loved ones? Or set sail to the unknown in the hope that new opportunities would bring greater fortune?

We know now that one million people crossed the Atlantic to make a life for themselves in America between 1800 and 1845. Six million emigrated in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By 1901, our population stood at just 4.4 million – half of what it had been prior to the famine.

And we are proud of the Irish who built their lives in other countries – the Irish emigrants who built skyscrapers in Boston and New York, who were the backbone of the shipping industries in England, and who brought their Irish culture to new communities across the globe. We point to these people as successes, as those who “made it”, and as proud beacons of Irish heritage.

In the context of Ireland's history, we must acknowledge that it is only in more recent decades that Ireland has experienced net immigration rather than net emigration. For some to say that Ireland is full is a disservice to Irish history and the Irish experience.

However, Ireland is experiencing net immigration. Estimates suggest that approximately 250,000 immigrants have come to Ireland within the past two years and our workforces are reflective of this increase. Non-Irish individuals now comprise about 20% of the workforce in Ireland.<sup>1</sup> This acutely seen in our healthcare sector. 20% of the non-Irish workforce are employed in human health and social work activities<sup>2</sup>. And we can only assume that this number is set to increase. Figures show that hiring from abroad in healthcare has increased year on year over the last twenty years<sup>2</sup>, and research from the Nevin Economic Research Institute suggests that there will be growing demand for workers

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nerinstitute.net/research/migrant-worker-estimate-december-2023#:~:text=Using%20the%20most%20up%20to,531%2C800%20as%20of%20Q3%202023>).

<sup>2</sup> (from 6.8% in 2002 to 19.5% in 2022.)

from outside the European Union to meet our increased need for healthcare and social work provisions<sup>3</sup>.

We also know that the health and social work sector has the largest number of new Employment Permits for those coming to work in Ireland from abroad over the past four years, with almost a third of all employment permits in 2023 relating to the health and social work sector.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the variety of countries that individuals are arriving from is becoming more diverse with more coming from outside the EU than before.

Data from the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland shows that 117 different countries were represented on their register in 2023. The top five countries represented in the register in 2023 were Ireland, India, Philippines, the UK, and Nigeria. Of those newly registered with the Board in 2023, more than half were trained in India. These skilled workers have brought their expertise to our healthcare system and without them, we must question how quickly the provision of healthcare in this country would crumble.

This data paints a distinct picture of our healthcare and social work sector. And knowing the vast diversity of our healthcare workers assists us in prioritising how best we can support these people who provide such a vital public service. As trade unions, we must ensure that these individuals are protected from discrimination, can be integrated into communities, and are welcomed into new spaces with open arms. However, employers have a moral and legal obligation to provide workplaces that are free from hate speech, in which their employees can access services and entitlements in an accessible manner, and in which their staff feel safe. Fórsa will continue to emphasise the need for strong anti-discrimination and accessibility policies, and a zero-tolerance approach to hate speech in workplace, and we implore the Government and the Minister for Health to do the same.

However, such rich and useful data is not captured across the entirety of the public service. There is limited information available from the Public Appointments System, the application process through which many public and civil service roles are assigned. This data shows that 88% of applications between 2019 and 2021 were from individuals who identified as White Irish. Of the individuals given jobs during that period, 89% were White Irish and a further 6% were White from any other background.

What does this limited data tell us? It tells us one thing – these public services roles are not reflective of the diverse communities that they serve. And this raises some concerns for the public service more broadly – are ethnic minorities represented in decision-making in public services? Why are individuals from diverse backgrounds not applying for these public service roles? What barriers exist to applying for these roles and how best can they be removed?

The Government has made some commitments to promoting greater diversity. The Migrant Integration Strategy was adopted by the Government in 2017, to run through to 2021, to “promote the integration of all migrants who are legally residing in the State”. Its objectives included enhancing diversity, inclusion, and equity for migrants across many facets of Irish society under themes such as employment, social inclusion, access to public services, and integration in the community.

On employment within the public service, the strategy laid out plans for proactive outreach measures to be taken by all public sector employers to increase the number of individuals from an

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.nerinstitute.net/sites/default/files/research/2023/NERI%20Report%20series%2028%20Migrant%20Workers%20Estimate%20Dec%2023.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> In 2023, health and social work permits comprised almost a third of all employment permits, a quarter of all permits in 2022, and approximately a third during Covid years 2020 and 2021.

immigrant background working within the public and civil service. It also set out an aim to have a Civil Service which is reflective of Irish society with 1% of staffing coming from ethnic minority backgrounds. According to the 2019 Progress Report, only 4% of applications came from migrant communities. There are little to no update on the progress of this important work outside of this.

As of late 2023, it was announced that the eligibility criteria to join the Civil Service has been expanded to afford foreign nationals who hold a “Stamp 4 permission” the opportunity to apply. Additionally, there exists the National Action Plan Against Racism<sup>5</sup> which sets out recommendations, specifically related to public service employment for migrants, outlining that an independent review should be carried out to assess barriers to recruitment for ethnic minorities in the public sector. It also recommends the development of a suite of measures intended to measure and reduce the ethnicity pay gap, building on the model of gender pay gap reporting. This plan is scheduled for implementation from 2023 to 2027.

It is imperative that the Government not only sets out to monitor its progress on improving diversity within the public service but publishes this progress – as an act of accountability and transparency, and a public display of their commitment to proactively promote inclusion of migrant communities, rather than paying lip service to the idea. I am calling on this government, and the next, to make known their track record on implementing change by publishing progress reports in a timely and consistent fashion throughout the implementation period of each of these inclusion strategies.

While I will hold further judgement on the success of these announcements until there are some measures of their outcomes, there are some pieces of this puzzle which are still missing. Ensuring that our public service staffing is reflective of society is important – but it is also important to ensure that our public services can continue to provide efficient and effective services to match the rapidly increasing population which Ireland now has. As Professor Aidan Regan<sup>6</sup> succinctly surmised in the Sunday Business Post, our choice is to expand the State and provision of public services, or to reduce immigration. The progressive choice is clear – we must expand our public services.

This means, simply, that we need more people employed in the public service. We know that Ireland has a relatively small public sector when compared to other small European countries. And let me be clear – this is not a call that I, on behalf of public service workers, am making in isolation. The need for an expanded public service is a rare proposal that IBEC and I have publicly agreed on. Business leaders and trade unions alike understand that the future prosperity of this country hinges upon enhanced and expanded public service provision. We need more people in roles that are critical to the effective delivery of services – and in roles that have yet to be created for a future Ireland which is dealing with the challenges of tomorrow. Fórsa will continue to call for this expansion and would welcome greater engagement from Government on this issue.

And it’s not just businesses and trade unions who want this, the public also want to see expanded public services. Public opinion and voting patterns also point to the public favouring policies that suggest the need for a larger state. We have seen how the Irish people can shape public policy, how Ireland has responded to the need to be a progressive and inclusive society in the areas of LGBT rights and women’s rights. Irish people want progressive public services to match the progressive civil society that it is becoming. Research suggests that there is a greater acceptance of the taxation needed to pay for expanded public services when there is high quality of public governance<sup>7</sup>. We

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/250147/ff9dea67-ef0a-413e-9905-7246b5432737.pdf#page=null>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.businesspost.ie/analysis-opinion/aidan-regan-ireland-has-a-clear-choice-invest-more-in-public-services-or-cap-immigration/>

<sup>7</sup> Taken from “The Irish State Post-Pandemic”

have had far too many examples in this country of how poor governance in public spending projects has eroded public confidence in the ability of Government. It is imperative that we implement transparent systems of governance to ensure that the general public are confident in the provision of public services.

We in Fórsa commissioned research by TASC on this very topic in 2022. This research titled “The Irish State Post-Pandemic” sought to address the gaps in public service provision that became so glaringly obvious during our COVID-19 pandemic years. This important research found that, in particular, there must be investment into childcare and early years services, in higher education, in the care sector, and in renewable energy. The COVID-19 experience showed us what we can achieve when the State mobilises with the objective of the common good, when people work together collectively, and when people have equal access to services such as healthcare. The end of the pandemic marked a sigh of relief for all of us, particularly for those workers who, through the most debilitating of times, provided services without which our country would not function. However, the end of the pandemic should not bring with it the end of creative problem-solving which places the needs of people – our people – at the heart of its purpose.

We must also recognise the intrinsic link between public services provision and attitudes towards immigration. We are fortunate here in Ireland that we generally have positive attitudes towards immigration. Recent research<sup>8</sup> by the Economic and Social Research Institute found that attitudes towards migrants are more positive in Ireland than they are across any other EU member state. However, that same ESRI research shows that those who are concerned about access to housing and healthcare provision are less positive about immigration. People who declared themselves as concerned about the “economic situation and cost-of-living” were also less positive.

It must be acknowledged that there is an attempt to use migrants in our communities as the scapegoat for the valid concerns that people have about access to public services and making ends meet. We must make it clear to all – the lack of affordable housing is not the fault of those who have fled war and violence. The sustained struggle with the cost of living is not their fault. And it is not their fault that communities have not been properly engaged with prior to their arrival. This is, unfortunately, symptomatic of a government which lacks connection with the people they are supposed to serve.

And it can be, and must be, better than this. If the case for expanding state-provided services has previously gone unheard, the real threat being posed to our democracy should prove the warning signal that action is needed.

And finally, as we deliberate the expansion of the State, we cannot forget those who have left this island and taken with them their skills and expertise that we so desperately need in this country. Between April 2022 and April 2023, emigration was above 60,000 for the first time since 2016<sup>1</sup>. We know anecdotally that many of our highly educated graduates in health and social care professions are leaving Ireland to work in Australia, Canada, the UK, and America.

The years abroad following graduation seem to have become a rite of passage for many Irish graduates – and why shouldn't it be? Young people should live their lives and experience the joys of living abroad. But we should make our message clear to all those who choose this path – there is a place for you here at home. We want these people to return home to Ireland, to bring their passion and enthusiasm for their professions into our public service, and to enhance this country with their knowledge and experience.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/JR5\\_0.pdf](https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/JR5_0.pdf)

There are many reasons that individuals choose to leave Ireland. The lack of affordable and available housing is a particularly prominent and concerning factor. One article<sup>9</sup> in the Irish Times reported that the housing crisis, the cost of living, and inadequate public services are driving young people abroad. One individual in this article discussed the immense strain of working in the chronically under-staffed HSE. Another references the frustration of attempting to access mental and physical health services but facing waiting lists that leave them without treatment. There are real, tangible solutions to these problems. But the question remains – is there the political will to solve them?

We must make a conscious decision to make Ireland better. Let's tackle these problems. Let's make Ireland a place where those who come here from other countries can work in our diverse and inclusive public service. Let's make our public service delivery world class and expand the State to provide these services. Let's make Ireland a society that our recent emigrants want to return home to. Let's do this collectively.

Colleagues, my sincere thanks for your attention and the opportunity to address you this afternoon.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-style/2023/08/19/young-people-leaving-ireland-i-do-love-galway-but-im-emigrating-for-a-better-quality-of-life/>