

SPEECH BY MINISTER JAN O’SULLIVAN TD

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Labour TD, Limerick City

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MINISTER O’SULLIVAN’S ADDRESS TO IMPACT CONFERENCE

Introduction

Good afternoon.

Ar dtús, a chairde, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil libh as ucht cuireadh a thabhairt dom freastal ar an gcomhdháil bhliantúil seo.

Ón lá a cheapadh mar Aire Oideachais mé, chuir mé fáilte roimh gach seans a bhí agam bualadh le daltaí, leis na daoine uile a oibríonn i scoileanna na tire, le tuismitheoirí agus le lucht an oideachais i gcoitinne.

Is mór agam an cuireadh seo uaibh ach go háirithe, mar tugann sé deis dom bualadh le dream [say “dram”] a oibríonn ag gach leibhéal sa chóras oideachais.

I want to thank you for the invitation to be here with you today.

It is the honour of my career to have been appointed Minister for Education and Skills.

I have devoted my life to education, to social change, and to tackling inequality.

There is no role other than the one I hold, which could better enable me to advance everything that I believe.

Two years ago, your Deputy General Secretary argued that IMPACT's education division was "a new voice [that] needs to be heard, [and] to be listened to".

I couldn't agree more, and so it is my particular pleasure to be the first Education Minister to have addressed this Conference.

Over recent years, the grades represented by IMPACT have grown considerably.

This is most obvious amongst the ranks of SNAs, where you now represent about half of all SNAs.

But you also represent caretakers, school secretaries, staff in the early years sector, workers in school completion programmes, and many other staff across the further education and training, and higher education sectors.

Perhaps more than any other body, you represent the entire breadth of the education sector.

And so I believe your voice, while still an emerging one, is one that will grow in importance over the coming years.

Education is one of the greatest social goods.

It gives people ways out of disadvantage and poverty.

It gives people opportunities to build better lives for themselves and their families.

And it enables people to reach their full potential.

Education cannot happen without people working in education.

And I want you to know that I value the work done by everyone in our education system. Administrative staff and those focussed on caring for children do work that is no less valuable than the important work done by teachers.

I have an opportunity to speak to you today about some of the burning issues that affect your different groups of members.

But first, I want to talk about pay.

Pay talks

Brendan Howlin has made clear his intention to issue an invitation to the public service unions over the next few weeks.

He will be inviting the unions to discuss the start of unwinding the Financial Emergency Acts, which have implemented reductions in public service pay.

I expect those discussions to begin in May.

We should not underestimate the difficulties involved.

FEMPI measures generated €2.2bn worth of savings to the Exchequer.

That sacrifice by the public service, and the impact it had on your standard of living, and that of your families, is acknowledged by Government.

You played a central role in putting this country back on our feet.

At long last, pay and investment in public services are back on the table.

That said, we are continuing to borrow to fund day to day spending.

The request to restore pay must be seen alongside the other pressures on public spending, in particular those to increase numbers working for the State – in the education sector, in the health sector and so on.

This year for example, we have been able to fund 1,700 new teacher and SNA positions in our schools.

That said, the Government made a promise to you after the Haddington Road Agreement.

We said that the next time we sat down with your representatives, we would be discussing improvements in pay not reductions.

Pay increases have not been a feature of the Irish economy in recent years.

Although the latest CSO data points to some improvements in the private sector.

Any normal functioning economy should see some regular pay increases for people.

But we cannot afford to revisit the mistakes of the past.

The aim for Government must be a sustainable public service pay policy.

A policy that will continue to support our ongoing economic recovery over the next few years.

We have spent the last four years fixing a broken economy.

We can't and won't put that at risk.

I hope that all sides can meet with the aim and intention of making an agreement that is fair to all involved.

That means an agreement that delivers for the employer, you and your public service colleagues, and those who are dependent on public services and the continuing economic recovery.

It must be noted too that public servants, in common with all employees, have already seen benefits this year to their take home pay.

In particular, continuing to take more low paid workers out of the USC net has delivered obvious improvements to your pay.

If we remain on the right path this year I am confident that further improvements can be made.

Low Pay Commission

Pay talks focused on increasing the take-home pay of public servants will be hugely important for you over the next few months.

But I am conscious that not all of your members are public servants.

Staff in the early years sector, in particular, are predominantly private sector workers.

And so our approach to increasing pay levels in the private sector is also very important.

Especially for the many of you who are low paid.

Since his appointment last July, I think Minister Ged Nash has done more to focus on the low paid than any of his predecessors.

Legislating to underpin collective bargaining, and new legislation to support registered employment agreements, will considerably benefit those who earn least in society.

More than any other step, the establishment of a Low Pay Commission will be of benefit to your members.

We have seen over the last few years the dangers of having a national minimum wage simply set by Government.

At the start of the crisis, a Fianna Fáil Government decided to cut the minimum wage to €7.65 an hour.

For a full time worker, that amounted to taking €40 out of a pay packet of €346 a week. When a new Government was elected, we were able to reverse this step, putting that €40 each week back where it belonged – into the pockets of people who face the greatest difficulties in supporting their families.

But the whole situation showed how unpredictable life could become for those earning the least.

Creating a statutory Low Pay Commission is about taking the politics out of the minimum wage.

The Commission includes representatives of workers and employers, as well as independent academics.

They have been given a short period of time to start their work.

We will have the legislation in place to underpin their first recommendation on a new minimum wage by the end of this Dáil session.

The Commission will be expected to consider a lot of hard data in making their recommendations – data on economic growth, on employment rates and trends, on the hours worked by those on low pay, and so on.

Perhaps more importantly, the Commission will be asked to consult with people who are directly affected by the minimum wage, both workers and employers.

This real-life experience will be vital when deciding on any new minimum wage rate.

The Low Pay Commission is an important Government commitment.

Another piece of this agenda, is the issue of those on zero hours and low hours contracts.

Such contracts can allow a decent hourly rate of pay to disguise the difficulty for workers in making sure they get a decent wage each week.

By the end of the summer, a study will have been completed in relation to zero hours contracts, and contracts involving less than 8 hours a week.

If this study finds such work contracts have a serious and detrimental impact on our citizens, then the Government will act.

We have seen a clear example of how this issue affects people over the last few weeks. Just last week, workers in Dunnes Stores held strikes in shops all across Ireland. My party took a clear stand on that issue.

What the workers are looking for is perfectly reasonable.

They want certainty on how many hours they are working, the right to be represented by their union, and decent job security.

Whether people are working in schools, or in supermarkets, low-paid workers should at least be entitled to decent and fair treatment.

Because the bottom line is that work should always pay.

And that those in work should have dignity in their lives, and an ability to support their families.

I make no apology for saying something clear to you today.

As economic recovery takes hold and as unemployment continues to fall, we expect to see the benefits of that recovery being shared.

That, put simply, will mean better working conditions and improved pay, particularly for low-paid workers.

Ongoing reforms

I've spent some time this morning talking about public and private sector pay.

I've done that because I know how job security and decent pay can have an enormous impact on each of your lives.

But pay is not the only issue that affects you.

So I also want to talk about some of the reforms that are underway in education, and a couple of other issues that affect IMPACT members.

There has been huge reform across further education and training over recent years.

In particular, the creation of Education and Training Boards has involved enormous change for, and commitment by, all staff.

I've heard that some of your members are unsure about the future role of the ETBs.

And whether they will play the central role in our communities that VECs played for over 80 years.

I want to assure you that I see enormous potential for a growing role for ETBs.

By becoming organisations of a significant scale, they are getting ready to play that role. The legislation that created the ETBs of course makes clear that they will continue to run schools, further education colleges, and other education and training bodies.

But it also includes the possibility that ETBs could play a greater role in providing support services to all of the education facilities in their area.

I think there are many areas where ETBs could grow over the next few years – from supporting technology in schools to playing a greater role in managing HR or capital projects.

I think your future is very bright indeed!

I know that discussions are now beginning in relation to the organisational design of the ETBs into the future.

And I have no doubt that IMPACT will ensure that your members remain at the very heart of that bright future.

Another area where there has been significant change recently, is in the Institutes of Technology.

The objectives of the technological sector reform are to raise standards, to deliver better quality outcomes for students, and to enhance the performance of institutes of technology in their important regional missions.

This is the case whether they are seeking technological university status or remaining as stand-alone institutes.

For those institutes around the country who are merging and seeking technological university status, the leadership, staff and students are working through a particularly complex process.

I want to take the opportunity here today to emphasise once again the importance of keeping open good channels of communication and consultation.

I have emphasised this point with the leadership of each of the institutions concerned. And I know that you are beginning to see some improvements to the levels of staff consultations in some of these institutions.

These new institutions can build on the institute of technology sector's unparalleled achievements in promoting access and social development in all regions.

I expect to publish the Technological Universities Bill in the coming weeks and I would like to thank you for your engagement to date on that Bill.

The last area of reform I want to mention is our work developing new types of apprenticeships.

For IMPACT members, in both ETBs and Institutes of Technology, a significant growth in apprenticeships in Ireland offer enormous opportunities.

I am encouraged that overall registrations in the existing trades are on an upward curve after a number of years of decline.

I established the Apprenticeship Council to issue a call for proposals for the development of apprenticeships in new sectors.

I understand that there has been a strong response to the call and I look forward to receiving the report of the Apprenticeship Council in June.

The ETBs and the Institutes of Technology will both play a central role in significantly expanding the apprenticeship opportunities for young people.

Challenges

These are hugely exciting area – areas where major changes are being implemented. I genuinely believe that those changes will lead to better opportunities for your members.

But of course we will encounter challenges as we go along.

Provided we address those challenges when they arise, I'm confident we can find workable solutions together.

Before I conclude today, I want to address two other areas where there are challenges we need to tackle head on – these are issues that affect SNAs and those working in School Completion Programmes.

I know that your SNA members have recently voted to take industrial action.

I've already spoken about my views on zero hours and short hours contracts.

I think they are damaging to the lives of people working on them.

And ultimately, I think they are bad for employers too.

You have strongly argued that SNA posts are increasingly becoming fragmented, and it is becoming harder for people to secure decent hours each week.

Whenever I have met your leadership, I have made clear that if this is occurring, it is unacceptable.

I know you have argued that I should issue a direction to schools to stop this from being the case.

But under the Education Act, I am required to consult with all relevant bodies before exercising my powers as a Minister.

And so I can't simply issue a direction.

I can however, start a negotiation, involving both unions and management bodies, to find a solution.

And that is what I am doing.

Within the last couple of days, the Department has written to management bodies, to unions, and to the National Council for Special Education.

We have asked all parties to come together over the next couple of weeks.

To understand the challenges facing management bodies that are leading to this trend. And to start putting in place a solution to address your union's concerns - concerns which I share - about the hours worked by SNAs and the wages that they earn.

I know that many of you are concerned about the future of the School Completion programme.

Let me say first that I have been in regular contact with James Reilly about the need to invest in these essential programmes.

As you know, a review of the programme is underway by the ESRI.

This review will examine areas like governance and delivery structures.

And it will tease through how School Completion Programmes can best support an integrated approach to addressing early school leaving.

We have a higher rate of school completion than any other country in Europe.

That is something to be proud of, but it is not enough – we cannot rest until all young people stay in school.

I know that preliminary information from this review indicates that a broad and diverse range of measures and interventions have been developed by local projects over the years.

The review will aim to capture learning from the most successful of these.

It will also help us to ensure that available funds are targeted to those services that best contribute to educational outcomes in disadvantaged communities.

The review is expected to be completed shortly.

What I can tell you today, is that James Reilly has assured me of his commitment to the School Completion Programme.

And of his determination to make sure that there is no cutting back of school completion programme services.

Investing in Education

I make no apology for believing in the truly liberating potential of education.

Equality of opportunity is within our grasp – through legislation, and through the right supports to include all children, it can be achieved.

Equality of outcome requires much deeper work.

It requires that we retain and develop the excellent quality of the education workforce.

And it needs those workers to have stable and secure employment free from discrimination.

But delivering equality also requires something much more tangible – it requires investment in education.

Shortly after my appointment as Minister, I realised the extent of the challenge I faced in delivering that investment.

Despite the growing numbers of students in the school system, the allocation for the education system was due to fall by €39 million in 2015.

It took months of intensive discussions, but in the end I was pleased to be able to announce that the education budget will rise this year, for the first time in recent years.

With Brendan Howlin's support, I secured an increase to the education budget of €60 million.

Over the next three years, 40,000 additional students will enrol in schools – over 13,000 of them next September alone.

We have now managed to ensure that the additional teachers, resource teachers and SNAs who are needed to support the education of those students, will be provided to our schools.

Since the Budget, I have tried to build further on this investment.

I have managed to bring some improvements to the staffing schedule for some small schools at primary level.

I have also found the resources to better support children with Down Syndrome.

And last week, I was able to announce that I have secured a further €50m – to complete the summer works projects which started last year, and to provide funding to a further 559 schools this year.

To replace their windows, or to fix their science labs or playgrounds.

That brings to €110m the increase in the education budget compared to 2014.

I want to be very clear today.

I think that this increase to the budget is welcome.

But I know that it's not enough.

I will never stop advocating for further investment in education.

We could better fund our schools, pay the staff in education better, improve pupil-teacher ratios, and invest in book rental schemes, school meals, or technology.

All of these areas are worthy of additional investment over the coming years.

And in particular, the early years sector – too long a neglected area of Irish education – needs to see a significant step-change in investment.

So that our youngest children get the quality education they deserve.

And so those working in this sector can earn a decent living.

But we must all accept that we will never deliver improvements to all of these areas in just one year.

Over the coming months, I want to work with all education partners, including IMPACT, to devise a coherent strategy for investment in education.

Because we must have priorities, and we must focus first on the areas that will best deliver for children and young people.

I look forward to working with IMPACT to deliver the investment that is needed to deliver equality through education.

ENDS