

Check against delivery

**Opening Remarks by Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar T.D.**

**Working Group of Committee Cathaoirligh/Chairpersons**

**22 June 2023**

**INTRODUCTION**

Thank you, Cathaoirleach.

Maidin mhaith.

Go raibh maith agat, a Teachta Kehoe, as an gcuireadh a bheith anseo. Tá súil agam go mbeadh an cruinniú seo úsáideach duinn.

Is deis atá ann cad atá ar siúl ag bhur choistí a chloisteáil agus chun ceisteanna atá agat a ardú liom.

Is deis atá ann dom freisin chun tú a chur ar eolas faoi cad atá ar siúl ag an Rialtas.

*[Translation: Good morning, Chairperson.]*

*Thank you, Deputy Kehoe, for the invitation to be here. I hope you find the meeting useful. It's an opportunity to hear about what your committees are working on and to raise any issues with me. It's also an opportunity for me to update you on what Government is doing.]*

Cathaoirleach, thank you for the invitation to join you today.

We all know how important committees are. They play a unique role in the legislative process, scrutinising legislation in the kind of detail that doesn't happen anywhere else – engaging with members of the public, interest groups and government departments.

I'm sure you have a long list of issues to raise with me, but I would first like to provide you with a brief update on the work of Government.

A Cathaoirleach, next week, this Government will be three years in office. It hasn't been defined solely by the pandemic and aftermath, as many thought it would be; it has been dealing with a range of unforeseen issues, including the outbreak of war in Europe, an influx of refugees and asylum seekers, and a protracted inflation and cost of living crisis.

### **Cost of Living**

After years of progress rising incomes in real terms, falling inequality and reductions in poverty and deprivation last year, poverty rates increased for the first time in a long time due to the inflation.

Now that inflation is easing, our objective is to restore the power of people's incomes and push poverty rates back down in the right direction.

Our limitation isn't the public finances – we have the money to respond – it's the risk of fuelling inflation if we do too much too quickly.

A Cathaoirleach, when it comes to any household budget, there are three elements to it, namely:

- i) How much you are paid
- ii) How much get to keep after tax, and
- iii) How far the money goes.

The next budget should make progress on all three fronts, putting money into people's pockets and ensuring it goes further.

Last year was a set back. I want real incomes to rise again in 2024.

As you know, some people argue that we must choose between saving or spending the surplus, increasing public spending or decreasing taxes.

The truth is, you can do all these things if you have a growing economy – the real choice is the quantum and the split.

How much do you do in total by means of financial interventions and what is the breakdown in terms of tax relief, increased spending on services, investment, debt reduction etc.

In other words, a bigger pie means bigger slices.

Today, I imagine we won't be debating how to strengthen our enterprise base in Ireland. Unfortunately, it doesn't get enough discussion. It deserves our attention. We must never take for granted our economic success and assume that full employment, record levels of trade and investment and budgets in surplus will persist no matter what economic policies we pursue. Wealth and jobs have to be generated, and it requires the protection of an economic model that has served us well. In other words, you have to bake the pie before you can divide it up.

The greatest risks to our prosperity, our wealth, is a fundamental change in policy when it comes to the economy, tax, trade and Europe. It's one of the biggest risks we face and it's my responsibility to warn about it.

## **Child Poverty and Wellbeing**

Our vision is to make Ireland the best country in Europe in which to be a child. I have established a new Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach, to co-ordinate government, provide strategic leadership from the centre and bring enhanced accountability to the child poverty and wellbeing agenda.

I want child poverty and wellbeing to be a theme of Budget 2024 and I'll make sure it is.

Earlier this month we published the Wellbeing Framework for 2023 which assesses our performance using 75 indicators - economic, social and environment. It allows us to compare ourselves with other countries and our past. It largely tells a positive story with plenty of room for improvement.

## **Climate Action**

A Cathaoirleach, climate change is the single greatest threat facing humanity today. We are the generation that has to turn the tide.

Climate considerations will inform all decisions we take as a government. We have the high-level goals, laws, targets and the plans – now we must translate them into meaningful actions on the ground.

## **Housing**

Cathaoirleach, we will do whatever it takes to solve our deep housing crisis.

We are making progress:

- 400 first-time buyers are purchasing their first home every week, the highest we have seen since the Celtic Tiger period, and more families own their own home in raw numbers than ever before (1.2 million)



- We are building more social housing than any year since 1975. The proportion of financial budgets for social housing in the past few years has gone up not down and that's raw numbers and percentages.
- We are providing grants to help people renovate old buildings and breathe new life into them, thus creating new homes in towns, villages and rural areas throughout the country.

We know this progress is not enough for many but we are doing all we can to speed up implementation of Housing for All and ensure the initiatives we have committed to are implemented – quickly and effectively.

### **Balanced Regional Development**

A Cathaoirleach, one of my priorities as Taoiseach is to ensure balanced regional development.

I believe we have made excellent progress in recent years. People want to live in rural Ireland. Remote and flexible working has opened up possibilities we hadn't dreamt of just a few years ago.

The Government is backing this momentum with investment, building vital infrastructure like new roads, schools and healthcare facilities, or getting broadband into every home, farm and business in the country.

I have tasked Minister Donohoe with bringing about a step change when it comes to the implementation of Project Ireland 2040 and he is doing exactly that – removing layers of process and focussing on bottlenecks.

## **War in Ukraine**

A Cathaoirleach, I'm proud of the way the Irish people have opened our arms to the people of Ukraine after Russia's brutal invasion.

Ireland has accommodated over 86,000 people in state-sourced accommodation, between people who have fled here from Ukraine and people in international protection IPAS accommodation.

I know we haven't always got things right on communication, but it is a difficult task and I would appreciate your help on this as Cathaoirligh and local representatives.

## **Northern Ireland**

Cathaoirleach, this year marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement.

Having discussed developments in Northern Ireland with Prime Minister Sunak, our shared priority is the return of functioning institutions to provide the services that the people of Northern Ireland deserve and make the economic reform that Northern Ireland needs.

As you know, the Shared Island initiative is driving all-island cooperation and engagement with all communities and traditions.

Just this week the Government allocated €56m from the Shared Island Fund, providing for a major new investment in Ulster University's Derry campus.

## **Conclusion**

A Cathaoirleach, once again, I would like to thank you and all of the Cathaoirligh for the work you do in leading our committees.

I look forward to your comments and questions.

**ENDS**