

Speech as Chair of Annual Conference working session on Childcare

9th April 2005

Annual Conference, Cork.

Good morning Delegates, and welcome to this session on a most critical issue, that of childcare provision.

I am happy to be Chairing this particular session entitled 'Meeting the Childcare Challenge'. There was a time not so long ago that this would have been seen as a "women's" issue. Now it is up there quite properly as a national issue of importance to the economy and social policy.

In spite, and perhaps because of, the rapid economic development of our country in the last ten years or so, many families face problems accessing affordable quality childcare. House price inflation has meant that families seeking affordable homes must often move away from what would have been a traditional extended family support network for childcare. Economic success has been paralleled with a shift in work patterns, increased female participation in the workforce outside the home, and longer hours away from home each day for parents. These combined factors are having a detrimental impact on the quality of life of many families. Accounts in the media of parents spending ten hours or less with their children Monday to Friday reveal a truly worrying problem. So, childcare is a central aspect of economic policy. It is a question of the workforce and proper functioning families. Moreover, this is an issue of child welfare.

The Progressive Democrats, and the policies we have devised and implemented, have been instrumental in the economic development of this country. So, as a Party, we have a duty to devise solutions to emerging growth related challenges- whether it is transport, healthcare delivery or childcare provision.

We made a promise before the last election to ensure that State funding of the childcare sector was kept under constant review. Under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme we have ensured that by 2007 at least 500 million euro is spent in the sector. We will see over 35,000 new childcare places come on stream as a result.

Still the supply of childcare places cannot meet spiralling demand. So the challenge remains. While the growing economy has increased childcare demand, the costs of childcare can threaten that growth by acting as a disincentive to employment. The Progressive Democrats must apply the same innovative approaches to tackling this issue, as we have too many others so successfully in the last twenty years.

Among all Parties, we have a track record for finding creative solutions to meet the toughest tests. Childcare provision is multifaceted as a problem. And the solutions may be as diverse as the families involved. This flexibility and diversity is reflected in the motions on childcare to be considered today. The recognition of workers in the home, tax measures to relieve the childcare cost burden, and efficient and adequate Gárda vetting of those working in the sector, are all pertinent and integral elements in 'meeting the childcare challenge'.