
Speech of An Taoiseach, Leaders' Statements, Dáil Éireann

Published: 16 April 2020

From: [Department of the Taoiseach](#)

Issued by the Government Press Office

Check against delivery

Ceann Comhairle,

I welcome this opportunity to discuss the actions being taken to respond to the Covid Emergency, to answer questions and to exchange ideas with leaders about future actions to rebuild, revive, and renew our country.

I am sorry too that Deputy McDonald is not yet back in this chamber but I know she will be once fully recovered. Our thoughts today – and every day – are with all those affected by COVID-19, with all those sick or recovering.

I also welcome Deputy Kelly as the new leader of the Labour Party. I wish he was taking over in happier circumstances for our country but I know from personal experience that he will bring his unique drive and determination to his new role. I'd also like to extend our best wishes also to Deputy Howlin, and I know history will record how he helped rescue our country from some of its darkest economic times and I know his wisdom and experience will be of great benefit to his party and to our country in the time ahead.

Ceann Comhairle,

Before I continue, I want to take this particular opportunity to express my condolences, and those of the house, to the families and friends of the 444 people who have died as a consequence of coronavirus in Ireland to date. 444 people – not statistics, but citizens, people with families, with friends, with lives, with stories. People who will remember them, people who will mourn and we mourn for them too.

I particularly want to mention the two HSE staff members in St Luke's Hospital in Kilkenny, who died in recent days. It reminds us how healthcare workers and other essential workers put themselves at risk every day to care for their patients, to keep us safe and why we must stay at home.

Since COVID-19 emerged globally only a short time ago, we have been presented with an unprecedented set of challenges. There has been no rulebook, no roadmap, no manual as to how this country or any country can deal with a crisis of this nature. Our response has focused on three broad areas:

First. Building capacity in our health service to respond to both new public health requirements (testing, contact tracing, social distancing, quarantine) and the potential surge in demand for our

health and social care services (beds, staff, ventilators).

Second. Finding ways to protect the most at risk, the old, frail and chronically ill, those who the virus targets, and deal with the challenges that presents for those we have asked to cocoon or restrict their movements.

Third. Developing policies and programmes to mitigate the impact on our economy and employees. To keep businesses alive. To keep people on the payroll. To ensure income support for those who have laid off. To prepare for a rapid economy recovery when the time comes.

Our over-riding priority in the days and weeks ahead is the protection and survival of as many people as possible. To minimise the loss of life. I believe we are united as an Oireachtas on that objective, and I am grateful to party leaders and to politicians in this chamber for their critical engagement with the different measures being proposed and enacted. Everyone has played their part.

In the times ahead, there are three questions we need to consider as an Oireachtas. The first is when we can begin to lift the current restrictions and start getting things back to normal bit by bit. The second is what we need to do to get people back to work and revive and rebuild our economy.

The third is how we can take what we have learned in recent weeks, some the things we have done to build a better society in the aftermath of COVID-19. How we can honour the sacrifices made in every community in our country and renew our society, by developing a new social contract between citizens and state.

The answer to the first question is being developed as we speak, based on expert opinion, and we have the advantage of being able to look at some countries that are a few weeks ahead of where we are at and seeing how their strategies are working. I do not know yet if we will be able to relax restriction on May 5th. I do know that if we can, it will be gradual and will happen over a number of months. And, as we know from Asia, they may even need to be re-imposed. Only a scientific breakthrough - a vaccine or an effective anti-viral medicine will truly allow life to go back to being as it was. Other breakthroughs - like a reliable antibody test - could really help though. And I am optimistic about the capacity of the brilliant minds in our international pharmaceutical companies and universities to deliver.

The second and third questions are ones that must be answered by the new government, and every single person in this Oireachtas will have a role to play in shaping those responses, whether as part of the government, or by playing a constructive role in opposition.

Finally, Ceann Comhairle, I welcome this opportunity to hear from all sides today. Do not be afraid to ask the hard question. If we can answer them, we will. If we cannot, we will say so. Do, please understand that in an evolving situation, it is not possible to answer all questions in real time; we simply just do not have all the information and there is so much going on and do please share your ideas as to how we can respond to this emergency.

No party has a monopoly on wisdom and we will need good ideas and good input from all parts of this house.