

Speech of An Taoiseach, Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Bill 2020, Dáil Éireann

Published: 26 March 2020

From: [Department of the Taoiseach](#)

Issued by the Government Press Office

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A Cheann Comhairle,

Inniu. Táimid bailithe le chéile chun gníomhaíochtaí a chur i bhfeidhm chun dul i ngleic leis an éigeandáil nar tharle ríomhe seo.

Sular phléimid an reachtaíocht éigeandála seo. Ba mhaith liom ómós a ghabháil dóibh siúd go léir a chuaigh le chéile ar aon chéim leis an iarracht náisiúnta ollmhór seo – is meitheal é – ag obair ar scáth le chéile mar a mháirean daoine.

Ár bhfoireann cúraim sláinte ár stát seirbhísigh;

Dóibh siúd atá ag obair sna húdaráis áitiúla;

Daoine atá ag obair go deonach;

Óglaigh na hÉireann;

An Garda Síochána;

Miondíoltóirí, feirmeoirí agus oibrithe iompair;

Ár gcúramóirí agus ár lucht cúraim;

Ár n-oibrithe poist;

Dóibh siúd go léir sa saol religiúnach, agus luchtanna cogaisíochta, táirgthe bia agus seirbhíse bia, agus gléis leighis;

Tá cách ag freagairt an dúshlán agus tá ár muintir fíor-bhuíoch as sin.

Ba mhaith liom a chur in iúl, do ch'uile dhuine comhairle sláinte an phobail a leanúint agus molaim go leanfaidh sibh ar aghaigh leis an gcúig chéim atá molta. Ní na lámhe go rialta, dea-bhéas a bheith agat agus tú ag casacht, coinnigh do lámhe ó d'aghaidh, fad fisiciúil a choiméad, agus fanacht sa mbaile, muna bhfuil tú ar fónamh.

Tá an pleann éigeandála atáimid ag tarraingt isteach inniu riachtanach chun agus an vírus a chur faoi smacht.

Déanfaidh an reachtaíocht, le linn tréimhse na héigeandála, na bearta seo a leanas:

Cíosanna a bheith reoite,

Coisc a chur ar díshealbhú, é a bheith níos éasca do lucht cúraim sláinte a athchlárú agus dul ar ais ag obair, agus iar-bhaill d'Óglaigh na hÉireann a chur ar a gcumas agus iad ag dul ar ais arís san arm cosanta ag an gcéim ina raibh siad nuair a d'éirigh siad as.

Tréimhse an-dheaceír is ea í do gach aon duine – in Éirinn agus ar fud an domhain. Ach cuma cad a thiocthas, beidh do shaol agus do shláinte chun tosaigh i gconaí roimh aon chúram eile atá ós ár gcomhair.

Ceann Comhairle,

I wish to share my time with Minister Donohoe.

We are meeting today to take unprecedented actions to respond to an unprecedented emergency. I am grateful to you, and to all our public representatives for facilitating this vital work.

I also want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the staff in Leinster House for going about their business with such efficiency, while following the recommended guidelines on physical distancing. Our laws derive their legitimacy, in the first place, from being passed by a democratically elected Oireachtas. Your work enables our

democratic life to continue in the most trying of circumstances, and it is precisely at times like this that we need to see it in action the most.

I also wish to put on the record the constructive role played by Opposition parties and independents to date. The Government is grateful to you for your understanding, goodwill and co-operation and it has been an example of politics at its best. It shows that when faced by a common foe we can put aside our differences and work together for the good of our country, to protect livelihoods and to save lives.

Following my speech, Minister Donohoe will provide an economic overview of the Bill and give a detailed outline of what is proposed. Later, after the contributions of each party and grouping in this Chamber, Minister Humphreys will conclude by looking at the Bill more broadly and how it will affect business. In the Committee and Remaining Stages we will have Government contributions from Ministers Harris, Donohoe, English, Kehoe and Humphreys to ensure that as many of your questions and concerns can be answered.

Unfortunately we cannot stop this virus but working together we can slow it in its tracks and push it back. Our national objective must be to flatten the curve. We can succeed if everyone takes sustained action. Nothing less will do.

As a doctor and a Politician I know the value of repetition. Give the best advice and then give it again, and keep repeating it until it becomes second nature.

So I would like to advise everyone to follow the public health advice and to keep following the five key steps. Simple steps that are vital to protect us all: regular hand washing, coughing etiquette, not touching your face, physical distance, and staying at home if feeling unwell.

Ceann Comhairle,

For the past three-and-a-half years so much of our political time and energy was taken up by the issue of Brexit. Time expended preparing for the impact of a possible No Deal Brexit. More time spent ensuring we avoided that outcome and did not see the return of a hard border on the island of Ireland.

Simpler times.

In one sense, this was valuable time that in other circumstances might have been directed at other pressing national issues.

However there has been one positive side effect. Because of the thousands of hours devoted by our civil servants and officials to prepare for all possible eventualities – because of the work our Ministers did to ensure that we would be able to withstand the worst effects of a No deal Brexit – we are now in a better position than if we were starting to think about some of these issues for the first time.

The work spent thinking about supply lines, about the impact of a shock to the economy, the money we set aside through prudent management of our finances – all of this is now being deployed against a different kind of national threat.

We did not expect or predict a pandemic of this kind, but we were prepared for an economic crisis, and we are in a much stronger position today as a result.

So I want to reassure the public that although the challenges will be great, we are ready to face them. And although the cost of these measures will be high, we are prepared to pay the price.

We can bear it and we will be able to pay it back as a nation. We do so willingly because it is the right thing to do and because we owe it to our fellow citizens.

By maintaining the link between employees and employers and companies, it will be easier for us to bounce back when this is all over. These actions will keep our economic infrastructure intact. It will also give businesses the best chance of making it through this crisis.

We are also making sure the self-employed are covered. I know the sacrifices so many of our self-employed have made to build up their businesses and practices and I know how worried they are now.

We will do everything we can to help sustain you and bring you through this Emergency.

Ceann Comhairle,

Today we are asking the Oireachtas to pass emergency legislation to respond to the COVID-19 emergency. Emergency actions that will mitigate the impact of the virus and enable us to provide public services.

Today's legislation – to last for the duration of the Emergency - will:

- freeze rents,
- prevent evictions,
- make it easier for health care professionals to re-register and return to work, and
- enable former members of our Defence Forces to rejoin at the rank they left.

We know that the financial impact of mass redundancies over a short period of time would have a serious impact on the ability for a business to recover, so we are extending the time-periods under which a person who has been laid off or kept on short-time due to Covid-19 can claim a redundancy payment from their employer.

So much work is taking place to help save and protect lives. For example, we have also approved a framework agreement with the private hospitals, so that they can operate effectively as public hospitals under Section 38 of the Health Act for the duration of the Emergency. This will add over 2,000 beds, 9 laboratories, critical care capacity and thousands of staff to our health service.

Some might ask why these things were not done before now – and why we have previously objected to measures such as rent freezes, a moratorium on evictions, and the co-opting of private healthcare.

The truth is that these are extraordinary times.

For example, property rights are always subject to the common good in our Constitution. I don't think anyone would argue that this is an extraordinary situation where the common good applies.

In normal circumstances, a freeze in rents would actually make things worse, it would reduce the supply of new housing, for example. So, therefore less rental properties becoming available. But this is a temporary policy, it's only for a few weeks hopefully, for twelve weeks.

However, that is not to say that some emergency policy changes might not make long-term policy changes.

One area is "sick pay". Workers in low paid sectors should not have to be out of work for six days to qualify for income support. Six days is too long and is bad policy both in terms of social justice and public health.

Desperate times do not call for desperate measures. They call for composure and they call for radical responses, that will provide hope and bring maximum benefit to those who need them most.

This legislation is designed to do just that.

Ceann Comhairle,

We will be remembered for what happened after this emergency visited our shores, and when we faced our greatest challenge. It will be the story of a great national effort to withstand the worst of it, and how every person played their part.

Finally, I want to acknowledge that this emergency has already cost lives and cost jobs, and is going to get worse before it gets better. People are afraid and are looking for reassurance. Politicians don't always have a good reputation, sometimes deservedly so, but we do have an opportunity to shine. Not as individuals, but as a group. We can show that the ideals that first motivated us to enter politics can sustain us when our country needs hope the most.

Go raith míle maith agaibh.