

Senator Rónán Mullen

Independent, NUI Graduate Panel

Newsletter, December 2009/January 2010



With best wishes for Christmas and the New Year 

Testing times...

This newsletter shows some of the issues I've been raising during the past year. For more information please see my newly upgraded website at www.ronanmullen.ie

This year there are thousands more people with worries about jobs, mortgages and other debts. The recent budget will be made worse by further tough measures coming up. But society's most vulnerable members must not be targeted. Government must protect investment in education - particularly for children with special needs. The tax system should provide more support, not less, to families of young children. And our commitment to overseas aid must be restored. The current spend may need to be challenged in some areas but we must get back on track to donating 0.7% of GDP by 2012.

People resent underwriting a banking system that was irresponsible and predatory. We need to bring to justice those who have endangered our economic well-being.

Above all, we need a new focus on the values that guide our choices in public and private life, in business and social life.

In the Seanad, I try to prioritise human dignity and the needs of families when considering policy and legislation. I would welcome your constructive criticism and suggestions. And if you would like to visit Leinster House please contact me at 01 6183930 or ronan.mullen@oireachtas.ie.

Finally, if anyone you know would like to receive this newsletter, please send me their name and contact details.

Ná bíodh leisce ort dul i dteangbháil liom más féidir liom ceisteanna a chur, no rudaí a árdú, ar do shon. Más mian leat cúirt a thabhairt ar Sheanad Éireann, beidh fáilte is fiche romhat.

Rónán Mullen



Towards better standards: Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly and Senator Rónán Mullen engage with participants at a forum on end of life care organised by the Irish Hospice Foundation.

View NEW website: www.ronanmullen.ie



Political briefing: Representatives of various university Life Societies meet Rónán in Leinster House. Photo shows, left, Stephanie McNamee and, right, Caitriona Cummins.

Politicians' expenses - new frugal approach needed

Politicians needed to set an example for others in society by accepting salary cuts and adopting a frugal approach to expenses, Senator Rónán Mullen told the Seanad on a number of occasions during the past year.

Criticising the fact that the Seanad had not debated the McCarthy report on proposed cuts in public spending, Rónán stressed the need for leadership in the country. "Top earners and those who have resources at their disposal must lead from the front. We will have to go where we would rather not go."

Earlier in the year, Rónán criticized unnecessary foreign travel by politicians, much of which was of little benefit to the State. On politicians' expenses, he told the Seanad on 6 October that the public had been 'scandalised' and that a trusted outside person was now needed to take an extensive look at public representatives and ministerial expenses - "to take a realistic look at them and come up with a set of recommendations which we will all accept as fair". The bottom line was that politicians would have to get used to dealing with less. "I believe in urgent and, if necessary, painful reform," said Rónán. "It is clear to people that many in the political class have been profligate."

Senator Mullen had the second lowest expenses of all members of the Seanad last year.

Mar a deir siad/What they say...

"A fine contribution was made by Senator Mullen on the education budget. On several occasions in the House he has made an excellent case in outlining the reasons teachers are so important ... and why we must ensure investment continues in education. He has been a great champion of this political argument." - Senator Paul Bradford, FG (Statements on Pre-Budget Outlook, 1 December 2009)

Focus on Education

Call to shield education from harsh budget measures

It would be "far better to use a scalpel than a slash hook" if making cuts in the education budget, Senator Rónán Mullen told the Seanad on 1 December 2009. Education should not be seen as a cost for Government, said Rónán. "The human talent we possess is the most important asset and our education system is the single most important item of critical infrastructure."

Rónán pointed out that many schools were now hard pressed to make ends meet and that water charges in the new year would complicate matters further. The moratorium on posts of responsibility meant that a key pastoral role played by year heads was not available to students. Rónán said it was 'not equitable' that voluntary schools received €90 less per student than community schools and €200 less per student than VEC schools. He also highlighted the Government's slowness in paying these grants. "Schools are being pushed into bad management practices where they have to borrow from banks in order to keep going."

Student service charges – 'tuition fees by the back door?'



Fighting for funding: Rónán with Gary Redmond, President UCD Students' Union, and Cónán Ó Broin, President, TCDSU, at a USI briefing on issues facing third-level students.

Claims about free education at third-level were no longer valid because of Government increases in the Student Services Charge, Rónán told the Seanad during an Adjournment Debate in November.

Only a fraction of this charge was being used for the stated purpose – student services such as counselling, health facilities and career guidance.

Documentation from the Higher Education Authority showed that the Government was progressively reducing its 'block grant' paid to colleges in respect of each student, while increasing the fees to be paid by each student by the same amount as the reduction.

"Has there been any prior debate about roll-back on the free fees scheme?" It looked like some colleges were trying to bulk up their expenditure under registration or commercial-type headings so as to "give the impression that the student services charge was being spent on student services," Rónán added.

Tighter laws needed to protect human trafficking victims



Talking trafficking: Rónán makes a point during a forum on the needs of victims of human trafficking organised by the Immigrant Council of Ireland.

"In what other walk of life where we see an evil do we refuse to target those who participate in and avail of it?" Rónán asked during a debate on human trafficking in June. He challenged colleagues to examine Swedish legislation criminalising purchasers of prostitution. This measure led to a reduction in prostitution and helped stem the tide of trafficked persons into Sweden.

Rónán's motion called for a range of measures to help victims of trafficking, including specialized training for Gardai, the establishment of a joint investigation unit to police trafficking throughout the island of Ireland more effectively, and to ensure collaboration with victim support agencies when identifying suspected victims. Victims of trafficking would also be spared trauma if enabled to testify in court cases by video link, he proposed.

President, not Taoiseach, should nominate senators

Politicians should avoid 'racing to the cookie jar of popular ideas' to see 'how many institutions they could destroy in a single day', Rónán told Fine Gael leader Enda Kenny during a Prime Time debate on the Seanad on 20 October.

However the current method of election was 'elitist' and voting should be extended to all citizens, Rónán said.

He also questioned whether the appointment of eleven senators by the Taoiseach was a good idea. 'There should be a debate as to whether the President would be a more appropriate person to nominate people to the Seanad', he said.

Calls for the abolition of the Seanad were misplaced: "The lesson of the past 10 to 15 years is that we need more parliamentary scrutiny, not less. We must also reform the way work gets done in the Seanad. We have a weak parliamentary system in this State which is militating against proper scrutiny by elected representatives of legislation and Government policy."



Senator Mullen argument on Nursing Homes Bill accepted by Government

The Nursing Homes Bill should provide for care assessments under the new Nursing Homes (Fair Deal) legislation be carried out by more than one person, Senator Rónán Mullen told Minister of State, Áine Brady, on 17 June. Supporting the concerns of Age Action Ireland and Nursing Homes Ireland, Rónán proposed a wording to require that more than one person be involved as care assessments required a multi-disciplinary approach.

"When decisions are being made for a person who may need long-stay residential care, there may be a number of competing interests". A geriatrician or a psychiatrist specialising in old age, would help to identify the issues causing concern," he said. In addition to a medical practitioner, the involvement of a chartered physiotherapist and occupational therapists might also be necessary at the care assessment stage, Rónán added.

The Minister accepted the substance of Senator Mullen's proposal and introduced an amendment at Report Stage to provide that more than one person be involved in the care assessment.



Celebrating a great tradition: On 14 November Symposium celebrating 150 years of Jesuit education in Limerick. Speakers were from left to right: Mr Éamon Stack (Chief Inspector, Department of Education and Science), Dr Anne Looney, (Chief Inspector NCCA), Prof. Jim Deegan (Mary Immaculate College), Ms Lorraine Halpin (HSI Limerick Business School) and Crescent College Principal, Mr Nicky Cuddihy.

Charity begins at home and continues abroad

An acute awareness of the problems facing people at home did not mean that our overseas aid commitments should be abandoned, Rónán told the Seanad during the year. Noting that the Minister for Overseas Aid had urged the UN to recommit to the world's poor, Rónán said on 9 July that "the moral authority with which Irish Ministers can say such things is greatly lessened" when we had "executed such swingeing cuts" to our own overseas aid budget.

Rónán said that serious attention should be given to the importance of small-holder agriculture in Africa. Not only did it resonate strongly with people because of Ireland's cultural and historical heritage, "it provides a creative and effective response to many of the problems faced by the African people". Some 80% of Africans lived rurally, 85% of African land had a medium to high potential for increased productivity and 80% of Africans lived on small-holder farms. International studies backed the hunger task force report's claim that small-holder agriculture held the key to African development and Ireland should prioritise this.



Transatlantic link: Rónán receives an award from Chicago City Council for his contribution to the John Marshall Law School trial advocacy programme featuring Irish and American lawyers and law students. With Rónán in Leinster House are, left to right, Professor Lance Northcutt, Judge Tom O'Donnell (Cook County) and Alderman Edward M. Burke

Time for Ireland to become energy independent

Ireland must become a safe and sustainable low-carbon economy, Rónán told the Seanad on 6 May. He urged that Ireland become a technology leader in wave-tide energy in particular. "Just as Denmark led the way in wind power, Ireland could become a leader in this new technology, thus creating an industry in supplying the rest of the world."

The achievement of renewable energy targets would require investment in infrastructure, Rónán noted. "We must not underestimate the planning difficulties in terms of construction of wind farms and the transport of energy from west to east. Sites designated under the habitats and birds directives are subject to strict protection under EU law. If these realities are not taken into account early in policy and project development, then problems can and will emerge."

Rónán also called for a Seanad debate on the 'Spirit of Ireland' proposal to turn Ireland into a net exporter of clean energy by combining the countries access to wind and water along its western coast – "there is the potential to save billions of euro over the coming years".



Foinse: Fáilte ar ais

Dúirt Rónán i mí na Samhna go raibh áthas air go raibh an nuachtán seachtainiúil, Foinse, ar fáil arís – an uair seo mar chuid den Irish Independent. Chinnteodh sé seo go mbeadh fáil ag an-chuid daoine air – agus go mbeadh "cúrsaí reatha á bplé inár gcéad teanga náisiúnta".

"Cuirfidh sé le cumas mhuintir na tíre seo léamh agus labhairt i nGaeilge faoi

ghnáthchúrsaí an lae, agus go mbeidh an téarmaíocht chuí in úsáid go laethúil."

Cosain na daoine is laige ó na ciorruithe

Ba chóir díriú isteach ar chur amú airgid san earnáil phoiblí sula ndéanfaí seirbhísí do na heasláin, daoine faoi mhíchumas nó do sheandaoine a chur i mbaol, a dúirt Rónán i mí na Samhna.

"Caithfidh díriú ar an gcaoi a bhfuil an Rialtas ag feidhmiú. Le fada anois, nuair a bhí aon fhadhb sa tír, cruthaíodh 'quango' nua éigin agus caitheadh airgead léi. An tionscal is mó a raibh borradh faoi in Éirinn le blianta anuas ba é an Rialtas é féin agus ní raibh sin ceart ná folláin."

Support society's vulnerable members – at all stages of life

The most vulnerable in our society should be the focus in the lead-up to the budget, Senator Rónán Mullen told the Seanad on 3rd November. Quoting St Vincent de Paul's Pre-Budget submission Rónán pointed out that, in terms of food, Ireland was the second most expensive European country - "a situation unchanged by deflation". There was therefore no moral justification for a cut in pension payments.

Rónán also raised a recent report about unborn children diagnosed with Down syndrome which showed that 90% of such children diagnosed pre-natally in Britain were aborted. Of Irish unborn children diagnosed with Down syndrome, 50% were aborted in Britain. "Professor Fergal Malone of the Rotunda Hospital had pointed out that the difference was that children with Down syndrome were more visible and accepted in Ireland. "That is certainly true. But it also owes something to the fact that legalised abortion is seen as a right in some countries while it is seen as a fundamental violation of human rights in Ireland," Rónán said.

"Our primary focus should be on the most vulnerable in society, including families supporting children with disabilities. When it comes to making the right choice, they should always be supported."

Sign up for our E-letter

If you would like to receive an occasional email briefing from Rónán about his campaigning and advocacy in the Seanad, please let us know by emailing ronan.mullen@oireachtas.ie and insert 'Send E-letter' in the subject line of your email.



Oireachtas hillwalk: Rónán with, left to right, Chris Andrews TD and daughter Saoirse May, Taoiseach Brian Cowen, Jimmy Deenihan TD and Seanad Cathaoirleach Pat Moylan walk in aid of the Irish Heart Foundation.

Some priorities for the coming year ...

Freedom of Conscience:

Bringing forward legislation to ensure that people are not required by law to violate personal religious and ethical convictions.

Education:

Campaigning to ensure that people with special needs are not victimised by cuts in public spending.

Ethical research:

Pressing the Government to enact the Stem Cell Research (Protection of Human Embryos) Bill – to protect human embryos from destructive research.

Beannachtaí na Féile ort!

Register for your vote!

In this newsletter you have read about some of Ronan's activities: proposing amendments to legislation, speaking in the Seanad, briefing fellow Senators, addressing groups and organisations nationwide and appearing in the media.

Since an election might take place at any time, please ensure now that you, your family and loved ones with NUI degrees are registered to vote at the next Seanad Election. Most existing NUI graduates are not registered to vote. This summer, many thousands more will graduate, but only a fraction will register.

Important and overdue legislation to widen the graduate franchise in Seanad elections is expected, and we will keep you updated. But meanwhile, to verify that you are on the current register, please contact us at 01 6183930 or email ronan.mullen@oireachtas.ie. For NUI registration forms, contact us or log on to <http://www.nui.ie/elections/docs/seclaimeng.pdf> (English) or <http://www.nui.ie/elections/docs/seclaimlr.pdf> (Gaeilge).

Le míle buíochas,
Andrew O'Connell,
Rónán Mullen Seanad Campaign Manager

Senator Rónán Mullen - Brief CV

- Independent Member of Seanad Éireann, representing NUI graduates
- Lecturer, Law and Communications, Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown
- Called to the Bar, 2003
- Former President, UCG Students Union
- Member of Board of Directors, Daughters of Charity Community Services
- Member, Board of Directors, CEIST (Secondary Schools Trust body)
- From Ahascragh, Co Galway

Mar a deir siad/What they say...

"I compliment Senator Mullen on a recent television performance in which he made a robust defence of the rights of the individual, particularly when it comes to character and integrity... he brought kudos to this House and to all public representatives, and I salute him for having done so." – Senator Labhras Ó Murchú, FF (Seanad Order of Business, 17 November 2009)