

Official Opening of the 2017 Kennedy Summer School

Speech by Minister Katherine Zappone

New Ross, Co Wexford

8pm Thursday 7th September 2017

THE KENNEDY SUMMER SCHOOL – THE KENNEDY LEGACY

It is an honour to be a part of this great evening.

We gather not just to celebrate the start of the 2017 Kennedy Summer School, but also to mark 100-years since the birth of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

The fact that it is just 100-years since his birth reminds us that his was a life cut tragically short – and that he was a leader with so much more to give.

Indeed if somehow the events of that infamous day in Dallas had not taken place it is easy to imagine that JFK could have been with us as an elder statesman, a guiding hand through the turbulent times which marked the start of this century.

There is no doubt he would be rowing in on climate change, the war on terror and even the domestic political, social and economic turbulence which our own country continues to emerge from.

Because Ireland is a place all of the Kennedy clan continue to hold dear to their hearts and JFK was certainly no exception.

However despite his passing we can take great encouragement that the Kennedy legacy and vision lives on.

In fact it is needed even more in these uncertain times of the Trump administration, Brexit and a world where millions of people are forced to flee from their homes.

It lives on through his writings, his speeches and gatherings such as this.

As if foretelling that his own leadership would be for a limited time President Kennedy wrote in his memoirs of passing the torch to a ‘new generation’.

I was part of that generation – as indeed were many not just in the US but right across the globe.

Ours was a strong Democratic household so it is perhaps no surprise that I have no hesitation in attributing the development of my progressive ideals and practice to the Kennedy era.

It was a time of great political and social leaders sparking unprecedented public debate – it was a time when old ideas were challenged, uncertainty was often in the air.

For a young campaigner, student and thinker it was an exciting time during which my mind was opened.

It informed my policies, shaped my vision and gave me my voice as a campaigner, a feminist, an agent of social change – and now places me as the only independent woman sitting at the cabinet table.

INDEPENDENT AND PROGRESSIVE

I think of myself as progressive, and by choice I am an independent TD.

What do these words mean? How do they shape my political outlook?

Independence is a description both of who I am, and what I am freed from. I am an immigrant to Ireland, the great-grand child of Irish emigrants.

I have lived in an Ireland transformed within the European Union, and I believe Ireland has a key role in transforming the EU to better serve its citizens.

For over 25 years I worked alongside my spouse, my Ann Louise, to connect local women, and men, in Tallaght West to each other.

It was the founding days of what has now become An Cosán, the biggest community development organisation in the country.

From those early days we put together the supports, the shared experiences, the acknowledgement of potential which not only created opportunity for women and men– but for their children.

The impact continues today – not just in Tallaght West but across the country. We worked to establish basic human rights with respect to gender, social class and the LBGT community.

We were never stifled by the legacy of ideology, the jaundiced views of party politics or the shackles of the establishment.

These are the experiences which shape my political outlook. I am free to think ahead.

Looking forward means listening and developing conversations with the people of Ireland about the things that matter to them. It means constantly looking for ways to improve.

I believe in an entrepreneurial state, one that can create the conditions for a common good and accelerate human development through science and allowing every citizen to flourish.

Connection, the promotion of human agency and championing shared human rights, these are the approaches which can give us a vibrant democracy.

It is an approach which gave us our Peace Process and more recently Marriage Equality.

A REPUBLIC OF EQUALS

Serving as Minister for Children and Youth Affairs is the greatest honour of my life. The best part of my job is the engagement I have with children and young people.

It happened when I was in Athlone on Monday, it will happen at St Mary's Secondary School in New Ross tomorrow morning and again when I visit Waterford tomorrow afternoon.

What is coming through not just from this engagement, but also from research commissioned by my Department and indeed independent research – is the thirst not only for a ‘Republic of Opportunity’ but also a ‘Republic of Equals’.

It is my firm view that the vision of equality compliments one of opportunity. But a genuine ‘Republic of Opportunity’ cannot happen unless we ensure equality and fairness for all.

To achieve a ‘Republic of Equals’ there are challenges which must be met. In my own direct area of work we are finding that many children in greatest need do not get help from public services.

Sometimes because they don’t know about the support available. Sometimes because the families or the young people themselves don’t want it. Often because public services don’t know about them.

We also know that most children in greatest need are supported at home or in their community, and more needs to be done to cultivate and sustain this support.

When communities come under too much pressure, relationships become corrosive and family, neighbourhoods even society breaks down.

My department commissioned research at the University of Limerick that shows how patterns of youth offending reflect unhealthy social networks in highly disadvantaged communities.

The solution here is not a programme or a punishment, but putting in place the networks which allow our young people to flourish.

I see around the country how sport, creativity and adventure provided for young people through the efforts of dedicated community workers and volunteers can transform or restart lives.

It is work supported by my office – with 57-million euro this year.

But we need so much more – and there are communities who are calling out for more. We must as a Government answer that call.

My belief in equality is also central to my approach to childcare.

A recent EU review of Ireland’s social inclusion policies concluded that ‘Childcare is extremely expensive, and it has a strong social class gradient.

I believe that accessible affordable quality childcare is a driver of equality.

The goal of progressive policy making is to create levers of opportunity today.

The children of tomorrow will grasp those levers.

We have taken the first steps. This year investment is €466m euro, an 80% increase since 2015.

All children under 3 can receive childcare supports and we are providing additional significant support to children aged up to 15 whose families need it the most. Those who earn less, receive more. We are pooling our public funds to enhance children’s equity of opportunity.

This package is one small step to a Republic of Equals and a Republic of Opportunity.

That is not to say that we are anywhere near the international norm on childcare.

As an independent woman, as a progressive and as a believer of equality I will be putting forward proposals during this budget process.

Overall we must constantly look out for ways to level the playing field for all our children, our families and all our people.

CAPITAL SPENDING

Levelling the playing field requires spending.

There is a critical category of spending we must focus on for the next ten years. It is capital spending. Capital spending today is only 40 per cent of what it was in 2008.

We need to spend more.

More on early childhood education centres, on schools, on hospitals, on roads.

These are the structural elements of our society austerity forced us to neglect. The next ten years must be the years of capital spending.

Capital spending changes the structure of our society. It creates conditions within society so that everyone benefits.

We must have a progressive discussion about what those conditions and structures will be. I see nothing but opportunity here.

Spending on education centres, public transport and hospitals creates conditions so that more people can contribute to the creation of Ireland's wealth, and to have a say in how that wealth is spent.

INVESTING IN RESEARCH

Spending on Research and Development is investing in the future, and arguably a form of capital spend.

Our R&D facilities should aspire to beat the world. Business, Higher and Further Education, and government all have a role to play. It is also a way to spread our spend more equally throughout the regions.

The promise of R&D is a step-change in the living conditions of our children, and their children. Not investing now implies losing more in the future.

Investing now means winning.

Investing in our people, our communities and our country is one thing – but a Republic of Equals means more.

REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Sitting around the cabinet table comes with wider responsibilities than leading a department and one area of policy.

This is particularly true for independents and progressives. As a lone voice I strive to put the stamp of my fellow campaigners on every area of policy.

Equality is a rich and complex concept.

So much more than protections and guarantees, it is being empowered to see, take, and benefit from opportunities that arise. This often requires hard conversations and hard work.

One of those hard conversations is about the 8th amendment, which does not allow women enjoy full reproductive rights.

Instead, it oppresses us with the burden of choicelessness.

The HSE's National Consent policy states that the 8th Amendment means that "there is significant legal uncertainty regarding the extent of a pregnant woman's right to refuse treatment".

In their submissions to the Citizens Assembly both Midwives for Choice and Doctors for Choice made clear that in their clinical judgement the 8th Amendment harms women who continue with their pregnancy.

Many submissions from women who have had children in Ireland attest similarly.

Choicelessness is not only about the ability to decide whether to remain pregnant, but about the ability to decide what is done to our bodies, including in pregnancy and labour.

That is precisely why repealing the 8th amendment is about reproductive rights for all women, including those who want to continue with their pregnancies.

Of course, for those who don't the 8th Amendment means they cannot access abortion in Ireland.

As we know every year thousands leave Ireland for an abortion, unknown numbers import and take the abortion pill, and more still self-harm to end their pregnancies.

We do not know how many thousands of women have continued with pregnancies against their will since 1983.

We do know that women without means, without visas, without freedom from abusive and oppressive partners simply cannot access abortion.

As long as the Constitution treats a foetus as equal to a woman, her autonomy can be nothing more than a myth.

The availability of abortion in England has allowed generations of politicians to avoid the hard conversation.

While the deaths and suffering of those who cannot or do not travel are lamented as tragedies.

But they are not 'mere' tragedies; they are the product of our constitutional, legal and political structures.

They are the product of the failure to provide leadership.

Any basic conception of justice demands that this be put right.

I continue to acknowledge that these are complex questions that trouble many, and I acknowledge and respect that.

However they are also questions on which no consensus can be reached.

As a woman, a progressive, a campaigner and a Government Minister I firmly believe we need a system of Reproductive Justice – which must include a referendum on reproductive rights.

We must trust women to make decisions for themselves and their families, and ensure that our structures mean those decisions really are choices.

True reproductive justice means building a society where the care of children is a collective effort, properly supported by the state.

It is about providing a roof over the head of every family and food on their plates.

It is putting in place accessible affordable quality childcare and education.
It is a country where sex education is effective and universal where contraception is available and affordable

We must ensure that living as a person with disabilities in Ireland is defined by autonomy, choice, self-determination and dignity and not by charity or sympathy.

We must be a society in which, as the adage goes, there are as few as possible unwanted pregnancies and as few as possible unwanted abortions.

The referendum next year will be part but not all of ensuring reproductive justice in Ireland.

Without repealing the 8th amendment and the clear establishment of reproductive rights for all, those who can become pregnant in Ireland will be structurally unequal to those who cannot.

That situation simply cannot persist.

CONCLUSION

Those of you who have travelled to New Ross – and indeed those of you from the South East, who maybe even have some of that Kennedy blood flowing in your veins have much to consider in the coming days.

There are many other areas I could address, the importance of youth mental health, the impact of Brexit on our young people and the current global uncertainty.

Our time is limited – so I will leave you with the words of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy in a special message to Congress in February 1962

"For one true measure of a nation is its success in fulfilling the promise of a better life for each of its members. Let this be the measure of our nation."

With that thought – it is my honour, my privilege to declare the 2017 Kennedy Summer School open.

ENDS