

6<sup>th</sup> May 2021

Consultation  
Forum on a Family Friendly  
and Inclusive Parliament  
Houses of the Oireachtas  
Leinster House  
Dublin  
D02 XR2

To whom it may concern,

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (Congress) is pleased to accept the invitation from the Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament to contribute to the consultation to identify supports and measures required for elected Members, their staff and the staff working in the Houses of the Oireachtas Service (13<sup>th</sup> April 2021).

Congress is the representative body for 44 unions and the largest civil society organisation on the island of Ireland. We represent the interests of some 700,000 workers and their families across all sectors of the economy, including Members' staff and the staff of the Oireachtas.

Congress has long advocated for concrete actions to achieve work-life balance. Winning the short working day was one of the earliest and most far-reaching achievement of the trade union movement. It has benefited generations of workers. However, existing checks on excessive working hours have become increasingly strained by advances in information communication technology and an always-on work culture. Trade unions were to the fore in highlighting the blurring of the boundaries between professional and private lives, the need for a right to disconnect and we played a central role in developing the new WRC Code of Practice. Congress recommends employers engage proactively with staff and their representatives to develop a Right to Disconnect Policy that takes account of the particular needs of the parliamentary workplace, and find the appropriate balance in terms of employer and employee outcomes.

When implemented in the right way, flexible working arrangements can really improve people's quality of life, make them happier and more productive in their work. That is why Congress was first to call for workers to have a statutory right to request flexible working, in line with other member states. I am pleased our calls have been heard and legislation giving workers the right to request remote working is currently being drafted by the Department of Employment. For many workers, flexible and remote working is not just an optional 'nice to have' perk of the job. Access to flexible working arrangements, such as remote, flexitime, part-time, split-shifts, term-time, etc. is vital to be able to enter employment or remain in the workplace. Congress recommends employers publish flexible working options in job adverts and give the new postholder the right to take up the advertised flexibility from day one. Giving new postholders the right to take up advertised flexibility from the start would also help to address some of the barriers people with a disability face accessing employment. This one simple step will increase the talent pool from which employers can recruit, and the diversity of those candidates.

As well as flexibility in the place of work and working hours, Congress recommends developing a more accessible and family-friendly work environment, such as installing lifts, an on-site creche and nurse (either permanent or during set periods, such as school holidays) and a private, comfortable space for nursing mothers to breastfeed or express milk. This is crucial for attracting and retaining people with a disability and women in political life. Congress further recommends the necessary steps are taken to deliver family-friendlier hours for sittings and meetings, proxy voting, maternity and family leave for Members, given that they do not have the protection of employment legislation, including working time legislation.

As is well documented, women are significantly out-numbered by men in frontline politics. Despite the population being evenly split between males and females, only 22 per cent of TDs are women, the 10<sup>th</sup> lowest female representation in the EU27 and ranking 89<sup>th</sup> in the world. The introduction of gender quotas in 2016 saw a doubling of female candidates to 31 per cent in the 2020 general election, compared with 2011. The gender quota is due to rise again to 40 per cent in 2023. Congress supports the Citizens' Assembly recommendation to extend gender quotas for party candidates to local, Seanad and European Elections. Real progress will only come about when we have more gender-balanced participation.

Less well documented, is the under-representation of minorities, working-class people and people with a disability among staff. At a time when people's trust in politics is low, it is vital that both our parliament and parliamentarians reflect wider society. Moreover, working for a TD or Senator is a big stepping stone for many into frontline local and national politics. Congress recommends the Houses of the Oireachtas follow the example of the Scottish Parliament of targeted recruitment via an Apprenticeship Programme they launched in 2014 in recognition of the underrepresentation of BAME people, and internships for people with a disability since 2018. Congress further recommends politicians make greater efforts to adopt an inclusive approach to recruitment to bring more people from different social, ethnic and economic backgrounds into the political sphere.

Congress acknowledges the financial investment and cultural shift adopting our recommendations will require. But, the price of doing nothing is far too high.

I trust the above is satisfactory and will be of assistance in informing your work on this important matter.

Yours sincerely



Patricia King  
General Secretary