

Senator Lynn Ruane

Autumn 2016

A Ceimí,

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude for the support I received during my Seanad Éireann campaign and to every graduate who entrusted me with their vote in the recent election. Everything I ever set out to do was in the hope of becoming an advocate for change so to be elected to the upper house of the Oireachtas was hugely surprising, terrifying but also exciting.

The knowledge that thousands of Trinity graduates put a preference beside my name, knowing I did not fit the mould of a typical Trinity Seanad candidate or the typical Trinity senator, was an overwhelming feeling and leaves me hopeful that change is possible in Irish society. The public perception of both Trinity College and Seanad Éireann as elitist and out of touch was challenged by the trust you placed in me to advocate on your behalf and for that, I am hugely grateful.

I walk through the front gates of Leinster House every day with the same sense of pride and determination that I felt walking through Trinity's front arch as a Trinity Access Programme student and as a students' union president. I am committed to using my time in Leinster House to push forward policy and legislation in aid of creating a fairer society where every Irish citizen can reach their full potential.

I am truly honoured by the mandate that I have been given and it has been a privilege to represent Trinity graduates in the Oireachtas these five months. With this newsletter, I hope to provide a brief description of my work so far and an insight into what I hope to achieve in the Seanad's new term.

Is mise,



Senator Lynn Ruane.



News



Civil Engagement Group

Pictured from left to right is Green Party Senator Grace O'Sullivan, Independent Senators Colette Kelleher, Joan Freeman, Frances Black, Alice-Mary Higgins. Senator Freeman is not a member of the Civil Engagement Group and not pictured is group member Senator John Dolan.

Civil Engagement Group

I co-founded the Seanad's Civil Engagement technical group and now serve as its deputy leader. The group's name derives from the shared background of its members in civil society, activism and social movements and a desire to better include the input of civil society in the legislative process.

Committee Memberships

I was honoured to secure a seat on the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills and look forward to working with the other senators and deputies on the issues facing the Irish education system. I will also sit on the Seanad Committee of Selection, which determines the senatorial membership of joint Oireachtas committees, and the Select Committee on Members' Interests, which investigates ethics violations by members of Seanad Éireann. This committee work is often unseen but forms a vital part of the legislative process and a large part of my work.



Policy Work

Education

Education was the issue that motivated me to run for the Seanad and it has been the central focus of my work since the election. In my first month in office, I made a submission to the Strategy for Education and Skills 2016-18 that made the case for continued public funding of higher education and made recommendations relating to the socio-economic sensitivity of secondary education. It also advocated for the improvement of mental health supports in secondary schools and how better to improve access to third level education from disadvantaged groups. I look forward to working with the Department and Minister for Education on these recommendations in the future.

Since the government's publication of the Cassells Report on Higher Education Funding in July, I have consistently made the argument, both in the Seanad and in the media, for the retention of a publicly funded higher education sector and the rejection of any move towards university fees and income contingent loans for students due to the burden of debt that would be imposed on them and their families. Evidence from across other European countries shows that a state funded higher education sector is entirely feasible.

During my time in office and as a member of the Joint Oireachtas Education Committee, I will be continuing to push for greater state investment at this crucial crossroads for the future of Irish higher education.

If you would like me to arrange a tour of Leinster House for you, family or friends, please get in touch by email and I would be happy to organise it.

The Eighth Amendment

In June, the Government tabled a motion to create the Citizen's Assembly, which will deliberate on a number of political issues – including the future of the Eighth Amendment. I believe that the timeline of the process for a decision on the amendment's future is extraordinarily lax and could eventually result in two years passing before a referendum is called.

I tabled an amendment to the motion that would have imposed a six-month time frame on the delivery of the recommendations on the Eighth Amendment and action on those recommendations by the Oireachtas. Despite another government defeat of my amendment, it received cross-party support and caused the government to provide a detailed justification for their envisaged timeframe.

This is an issue that I will continue to be active on in the coming months as the Citizens' Assembly begins its deliberations.



*I was delighted to launch the SUAS ABC One In Three campaign, which aims to build relationships with Irish businesses in order to fund campaigns to tackle literacy difficulties among children in disadvantaged areas.
More info at suas.ie*

Drug Policy

As a former addiction programme developer in west Dublin, I have significant experience of and interest in drug policy and progressive drug policy reform. I support the decriminalisation of drugs and the treatment of addiction as a public health issue, rather than one of criminal justice. As a result, when the government tabled their amendments to the Misuse of Drugs Act in June, I was deeply concerned by the focus of the proposed changes on the further criminalisation of drug possession.

I submitted an amendment to the bill that would have shifted the focus from those suffering from addiction to those higher up in the illicit drug trade. While the amendments were eventually defeated by the government, they attracted support from a number of parties and independent senators, as well as generating a healthy and interesting debate on Irish drug policy. I'll be working with stakeholders and other parliamentarians to produce a drug law reform bill in the new term that is progressive and recognises the complex nature of the Irish illicit drug trade and addiction.

If you would like me to raise a matter in the Seanad on your behalf, you can contact me via email to discuss it further.

Seanad Reform

On the first day of the 25th Seanad, I co-sponsored a bill with ten of my Seanad colleagues that would radically reform how elections to the house are conducted. Using the recommendations of the Manning Report as its basis, the bill would introduce universal suffrage in Seanad elections to all Irish citizens and expand the franchise of the university seats to all third level graduates. The bill is now at second stage in the Seanad and was indicated to have the support of the Taoiseach during his September address to Seanad Éireann. I look forward to working with all parties to ensure it becomes law in the new term.

Ministerial Engagement

Since my election, I have been keen to use my new position to engage constructively with government ministers and the civil service.

- I recently met with Minister for Education Richard Bruton T.D. to discuss my recommendations relating to secondary education and the future funding model for Irish third level education.
- I have met with Minister for Social Protection Leo Varadkar T.D. to raise my concerns on coverage gaps relating to lone parent allowances, rent allowances, social housing, Back to Education Allowance and Jobseekers' Allowance.
- I recently took part in a private discussion with Minister of State for the National Drugs Strategy Catherine Byrne T.D. to discuss her plans for Irish drug policy and to make a case for an examination of the Portuguese decriminalisation model.



I officially took my seat in Seanad Éireann when I signed the register on May 3rd.

If you would like to follow the media coverage of my work inside and outside the Seanad since my election, you can do so on my website.

Trinity College Dublin

I have been in regular contact and coordination with officials within the university administration and the college's students' union to ensure that the interests of staff, students, graduates and the university as a whole is well represented in the Oireachtas. The recent fall in the international university rankings of Trinity and other universities are deeply concerning and it is a high priority of mine to see this downward trend reversed and ensure the international competitiveness of our third level sector.

I will be working through my role on the Oireachtas Education Committee to call for a speedy and decisive reaction to the findings of the Cassells Report on Higher Education Funding. The sector is in desperate need of a significant injection of funds and the sooner a decision is made on the future funding mechanisms for Irish universities, the sooner those universities can recover lost ground in international rankings.

I have also been coordinating with research staff in Trinity and other colleges to discuss strategies relating to Ireland's attractiveness to EU Horizon 2020 third level research funding, particularly in the wake of the UK's decision to leave the European Union. While I was disappointed by the result of the Brexit referendum, it cannot be denied that it presents opportunities for Irish higher education due to the greater availability of EU funding. Improving both the quality and quantity of academic research in Trinity and other colleges will improve university citations and as a result - will help to reverse the downward fall in rankings.

While the quality and quantity of academic research is certainly a concern, I believe it is also of equal importance that state funding is allocated to research projects across a wide range of academic disciplines, from the arts and humanities to STEM subjects, without one discipline becoming prioritised over another. The two bodies that are separately responsible for allocating state research funding in humanities and in STEM subjects, the SFI and the PRTL are in the process of merging and there are significant concerns that the balance of future funding will move in favour of science and technology to the detriment of arts and humanities.

I will be working through the Oireachtas Education Committee to ensure these concerns are not realised and that we maintain a healthy balance between disciplines in terms of research funding allocation.



I was honoured to be a guest on the Late Late Show following my election in April.

Looking Ahead

As the Seanad reconvenes for the new terms, there are a number of priority areas that I will be engaged with on an ongoing basis.

- I will be continuing my advocacy both inside and outside the Oireachtas on behalf of a publicly funded third level education sector.
- I will be engaging with the public consultation process for the National Drugs Strategy and making the case for a policy shift to the decriminalisation model currently used in Portugal.
- I have co-sponsored a bill with Green Party Senator Grace O'Sullivan to prohibit the sale and manufacture of plastic micro-beads due to the significant concerns relating to their impact on Irish coastlines and its surrounding marine ecosystem.
- I have co-sponsored a bill with Senator Fintan Warfield that would reduce the voting age at local and European elections to 16 with the aim of encouraging youth engagement in local communities and with our representation within the European Union.
- I am currently developing a national advocacy policy with Solas Project, which will become a national model on advocating for education equality in areas of disadvantage.
- I will be continuing to work with Trinity in relation to the university's funding crisis, international rankings and research funding.

Senator
Lynn Ruane

Lynn Ruane is an independent senator serving in Seanad Éireann, a former President of Trinity College Dublin's Students' Union and a lifelong activist on issues of justice and equality.

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