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EU plan to pay energy firms millions

■ Bid to stabilise sector with public funds despite firms' soaring profits

Paul Hosford
Political Correspondent

The Government could be asked to give tens of millions to retail energy companies in a bid to stabilise the sector, despite soaring prices and record profits.

The optics of any financial assistance for energy companies would be bad for the Government at a time when half of households are facing crippling bills.

European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen last week outlined a number of measures that the EU will take to tackle rising energy costs. Among these is the loosening of State aid rules to allow governments to give money to energy companies that are suffering liquidity issues.

The issue was discussed at an emergency meeting of EU energy ministers on Friday. Sources said the European Commission could make its final proposals as early as tomorrow. One source said EU ministers were keen to avoid companies having to access lenders of last resort, such as central banks.

Senior Government sources were keen to stress that the plan would see retail energy firms helped due to concern about the amount of money they have to keep as collateral on wholesale gas prices.

At least two of these firms have told the Government the reserve requirements required for the purchase of gas are impacting liquidity. One senior minister said the Government will have a windfall tax on electricity generators "no matter what" but that the EU proposal stood to negate at least some of the money generated by a windfall tax on larger-than-normal profits.

Ministers said they were "not aware" of any strings to be attached to the funding, but a Government source said there was a "keen awareness" of the optics of giving public money to firms whose prices have risen.

However, senior sources said the EU's proposal to cap revenues of non-carbon-producing generators would see funds put directly towards helping customers as prices rise.

Energy, which last week

became the latest energy company to announce a price hike, warned the Government in August that there is a risk that Irish-based retailers could face the prospect of not having the ability to purchase available gas due to "massive advance collateral payments" being made before gas is supplied.

The Energia letter does not ask for support, but urges the Government to engage with the sector in order to ensure the market does not "malfunction". The letter says that the wholesale price of gas has risen 10-fold in the last year. While this increases overheads for retail providers, it also adds to the amount of collateral they have to pay in advance.

Energia's price increase followed Electric Ireland's latest hike of 26.7% for electricity and 37.5% for gas, hitting 1.1m customers and coming after similar increases by other providers.

ECB president Christine Lagarde on Friday ruled out using ECB money to support energy firms. Sinn Féin energy spokesman Darren O'Rourke said liquidity supports and the windfall tax must go hand-in-hand, with a priority of lowering bills.

"In a lot of cases there would be public opposition to energy companies at a time of profits," he said. "If the EU proposes these liquidity supports, there has to be a windfall tax on hyper-normal profits."

The Government is ruling nothing out in terms of cutting bills, Foreign Affairs Minister Simon Coveney said. "I think the overall package is what will count here, whether we look at price caps, whether we look at energy credits, all of that will add up, but what I can say is that these are unprecedented times and the financial response from the Government will be unprecedented as well."

Meanwhile, Government sources have confirmed that a suite of measures aimed at small and medium businesses will be included in this month's budget.

These will include low cost loans similar to Brexit and Covid schemes, grants for exporters and another "broader" scheme.

Sealed with a Lowry kiss



Shane Lowry kisses the trophy after his victory in the BMW PGA tournament at Wentworth Golf Club, in England. SEE Sport: 15 Picture: Adam Davy/PA

Minister has 'change of opinion' on abortion

Elaine Loughlin
Deputy Political Editor

A Fianna Fáil minister who campaigned for a no vote on abortion says her position has changed and she now believes the law does not go far enough in this country.

Anne Rabbitte, who was among a group of Fianna Fáil TDs and senators who posed for a now-infamous picture ahead of the 2018 referendum, admits she was out of touch with her electorate who voted overwhelmingly in favour of repealing the Eighth Amendment.

In a candid interview with the *Irish Examiner*, the

minister of state for disabilities said she believes her outspoken approach to various issues could see her overlooked when it comes to further promotion within the party and to Cabinet.

Ms Rabbitte, who has publicly criticised the HSE on a number of issues, said she "absolutely" believes her straight-talking approach may work against her in December's expected reshuffle.

"I'd love to hold onto being a minister, and one doesn't know because there are some very, very capable people in all backbenches," she said. "I am one step away from a backbench and I'm



Anne Rabbitte: Straight talk may hurt my reshuffle chances.

one step away from a senior position. So I'm in a very vulnerable position."

On the issue of abortion, she said her opinion has now changed after being "amazed" by the elderly women of Ireland who voted in favour of providing access to terminations, and has also been influenced by her two teenage daughters.

"It just didn't happen that there was a light-bulb moment," she said. "People have amazed me. Women that I would meet in my own area, that would be in their 80s, would turn to me and say: 'Yes, I voted yes because I remember the marriage bar, and I remember the mother and baby homes, and I know what happened and

yes, I think it's right that women would have their own say.'

"What also amazed me is my own two daughters — one is 19 and one is under 18. My youngest regularly would keep me in check and perhaps that's where I have come to that position, that actually it's OK to change your opinion and it's OK to let people know."

She added that altering your views shows that you are "in touch" and listening to people.

"I thought I was in touch with my electorate, perhaps I thought I was representing their views," she said. "My

electorate overwhelmingly accepted repealing the Eighth, and I was behind the curve."

While Ms Rabbitte would not comment on the current review of abortion legislation in Ireland, she said: "Where couples are given news that perhaps the baby won't survive, and it's clinically the opinion of the gynecologist, we have to leave the choice of their healthcare to the couples themselves.

"I do think it's wrong that they have to leave the State. I still don't think we have addressed that piece of it." News: 4

More people on wait lists for inpatient cataract treatment

Neil Michael

The number of people booked for inpatient day care cataract procedures is on the increase, according to the latest inpatient waiting list figures.

Most of the hospitals that carry out these procedures say there are now more people waiting than there were three months ago.

In June, Health Minister Stephen Donnelly said 5,781 people were waiting as of the end of May. He said this figure compared favourably with figures in December 2017, when 8,027 patients were waiting for an inpatient day care cataract procedure.

However, despite 1,300 of those waiting in May having been given an offer of faster care in, among other options, a private hospital, more than 5,827 people are now waiting.

While the number on inpatient day care lists has increased slightly, the number of people on outpatient

ophthalmology lists continues to fall.

At the end of May, the number was 38,713 but it had fallen to 37,449 by the end of August, according to the latest National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) figures.

The 1,264 reduction in those on outpatient waiting lists for ophthalmology covers a period in which around 500 to 600 people travelled to the North to receive treatment rather than waiting any longer.



Stephen Donnelly: 5,781 people were waiting at the end of May.

The NTPF's validation process — which includes people being removed from a list if they or their GP do not reply within a month to a HSE letter asking them if they still want their cataracts done — also results in falling figures.

As reported last week, the NTPF and the HSE have successfully removed 49,500 patients from all waiting lists this year as of the end of August.

In response to questions last week about rising lists following the latest NTPF figures, the Department of Health said: "Increased demands associated with emergency department presentations are putting further pressure on elective access."

The latest inpatient day care figures for cataract treatment come as a bus service to Belfast started by Independent TDs Michael Collins and Danny Healy-Rae marked its 100th journey to Belfast. News: 5

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Referee abused

An investigation is underway in Kerry after an under-11 hurling match — operating under 'silent sideline' and 'no score-keeping' guidelines — was abandoned early in the first half because of unacceptable abuse from the sideline. Monday Sport: 2

Ukraine recovers 3,000sq km in counter-offensive

Karl Ritter and Hanna Arhivova

Ukrainian forces have pushed their counter-offensive against Russia in the country's east, exploiting quick gains they made in a week of fighting that has sharply changed the course of the conflict. Ukraine's quick action to reclaim

Russia-occupied areas in the north-eastern Kharkiv region forced Moscow to withdraw its troops to prevent them from being surrounded, leaving behind significant numbers of weapons and munitions in a hasty retreat. The war marked 200 days yesterday.

Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy mocked the Russians in a video late on Saturday, saying: "The Russian army in these days is demonstrating the best it

can do, showing its back." Yesterday, he posted a video of Ukrainian soldiers hoisting the national flag over Chkalovske, another town they reclaimed from the Russians.

Ukraine's military chief, General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, said Ukraine has liberated about 3,000sq km since the beginning of September.

He said Ukrainian troops are now about 50km away from the border with Russia. The Russians' pullback

marked the biggest battlefield success for Ukrainian forces since they thwarted a Russian attempt to seize the capital, Kyiv, at the start of the nearly seven-month war.

Ukraine's attack in the Kharkiv region came as a surprise for Moscow, which had relocated many of its troops from the area to the south in expectation of the main Ukrainian counter-offensive there. Editorial: 8 World: 16

'Actually, it's OK to change your opinion'

Anne Rabbitte posed for an infamous picture during the campaign on the Eighth Amendment. Her views have since changed, she tells Deputy Political



Editor
Elaine Loughlin

ANNE RABBITTE jokingly refers to herself as a "tough old bird" but is acutely aware that many will not be aware of the context behind the description.

After her husband Paddy suddenly died in 2011, she stopped going to Mass. Not because of any loss of faith but instead, faced with grief, three children under the age of nine to raise, and a job to hold down, something had to give.

Eleven years on and the disabilities minister still becomes emotional when she finds herself drifting into conversation about that time.

"When Paddy died, I made a decision that there was a part of me that had to mind me, so I actually forfeit Mass for me," she says. "I couldn't be getting up every morning of the week doing the routine — there had to be a morning that wasn't routine. So, I actually said: 'Well, if I'm a good person, that's OK, the kids come first.'

"I made that decision, based on the fact that I couldn't stretch it any more ... three young kids, you know.

"There was no point in stressing the kids out, getting us on for the 11 o'clock Mass, everybody looking perfect. I dreaded every last minute of it because I was too bloody exhausted and resenting it, whereas I would prefer actually to do something good."

Keeping up appearances is something that "doesn't wash" with the Galway East



Anne Rabbitte: 'It's so hard to succeed in politics, so you're always trying to be the best of what you can be, be it a TD, a councillor, or a minister.'

Picture: Moya Nolan

TD and yet, as her children have grown into teenagers and young adults, the family's personal loss is something she has rarely spoken about.

"It's funny, on a national basis people don't realise that I have been widowed with three kids and I don't talk about it. I'm quite happy not to talk about it because my kids always say to me 'we've nothing to do with your job', which in turn actually means: 'Do not talk about us.'

"I suppose I went into politics with people not underestimating what depth or strength of character I had or what my circumstances were."

In entering politics, a life Ms Rabbitte would never have chosen if her late husband was still alive, she could have used her platform to represent other bereaved parents, but she "would have hated people to think of it as a sympathy conversation".

She says: "Perhaps as a mother, you double down in your private life. And you park it. It's so hard to succeed in politics, so you're always trying to be the best of what you can be, be it a TD, a councillor, or a minister."

Ms Rabbitte is acutely aware of the struggles facing every part of society due to spiralling inflation.

Asked if she worries the cost-of-living pressures on families will result in an increase in mental health issues and suicide, similar to what was seen after the financial crash, she responds: "People are fragile. Certain things we lost coming out of Covid, like people are under pressure, be it young people, it's not that they've lost years, they've lost how to connect with people. They've lost confidence in themselves and they bring that into college.

"Then you have the parents who are worried about providing in a very tight

space at the moment.

"It's not just one part of society that is actually under pressure at the moment. It's right across; from the businessperson to the family, the single mom trying to put the kids out to school, or the family that has a child with additional needs or the older parent, the carers — they're all under pressure. But that doesn't mean to say the Government won't respond and is not listening."

Ms Rabbitte puts it that "September should be the January" because for a lot of people it heralds the start of "pressure season".

"It's the start of the expectations. It's how many Fridays to Christmas — all that adds into the psyche and yes, it does prey on people's well-being."

However, Ms Rabbitte believes that, unlike during the recession, when suicide rates rose by 15% in Ireland, people are more open about talking about mental health,

while education has been key.

"The communication around mental health, being able to seek advice, being able to talk to people — and probably men are the worst and reaching out for it, still."

THIS interview had been arranged not to speak about grief, but another personal issue: Ms Rabbitte's view on abortion.

She was among a group of Fianna Fáil TDs and senators who posed for an infamous no campaign picture ahead of the Repeal referendum in 2018.

But opinions evolve and Ms Rabbitte now believes the current abortion legislation does not go far enough, pointing out that couples who are told their child will not survive are still being forced to travel abroad.

Does she regret taking part in the picture?

"That's a photograph at a



Anne Rabbitte with Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin

point in time and has stood still since, that's where that is. But that doesn't mean to say that Anne Rabbitte's opinions have stood still in time."

Although she "willingly stood in that day", she says at the time she was relatively new to Leinster House and wasn't reared in a political

"People don't realise that I have been widowed with three kids and I don't talk about it. I'm quite happy not to talk about it

yes, I think it's right that women would have their own say' — they amazed me.

"What also amazed me is my own two daughters, one is 19 and one is under 18. My youngest regularly — now she has a very strong opinion — would keep me in check and perhaps that's where I have come to that position that actually it's OK to change your opinion and it's OK to let people know."

Ms Rabbitte says that altering your views shows that you are "in touch" and listening to people.

"I thought I was in touch with my electorate, perhaps I thought I was representing their views. My electorate overwhelmingly accepted repealing the Eighth and maybe I was behind the curve. They were ahead of me."

And so, what next for the self-proclaimed 48-year-old "tough old bird"?

In her role in the Department of Health, she has had her fair share of battles, both public and private, with officials in the HSE, but won't be changing her approach.

December is likely to see changes among the ministerial ranks, but Ms Rabbitte "absolutely" believes her outspoken personality may limit her progression.

"I'd love to hold on to being a minister and one doesn't know because there are some very, very capable people in all backbenches. I am one step away from a backbench and I'm one step away from a senior position. So I'm in a very vulnerable position."

Irish Examiner



Anthony Daly

Wounded Limerick look like they need a rest



Page 5

Encore une fois

O'Gara's La Rochelle set up Leinster rematch



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Nifty fifty

Haaland's landmark goal as City go top



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In the face of adversity



Jamie Barron of Waterford clashes with Brian Roche of Cork during the Munster Championship match at Páirc Uí Chaoimh yesterday. SEE: Sport, Pages 2&3

Picture: David Fitzgerald/Sportsfile



'They broke the locks and slept in our shop for two weeks'

News: 2

Crowning Charles is deeply silly — and it's costing the earth

Suzanne Harrington, Life/Style: 10



Ryan: Fast fashion is like smoking

Elaine Loughlin
Political Editor

Future generations will be horrified by fast fashion and our current consumption habits in the same way as we now look back at how smoking was once acceptable everywhere, the Green Party leader has warned.

Eamon Ryan said generations to come will wonder how we let our waterways become so polluted, and will question our overreliance on cars.

Mr Ryan has also warned that, as a country that sells itself as being a green destination both for tourism and food production, Ireland is at risk of being accused of "greenwashing" if we allow our natural ecosystems

■ 'Generations will wonder how we let waterways get so polluted'

and biodiversity to decline further.

In an interview to mark the start of the *Irish Examiner's* sustainability month coverage, Mr Ryan said: "I think fast fashion is one of the issues that people will, in the future, look back on."

"It's like, why did we allow smoking on the bus? Well, because, you know, no one thought to maybe say: 'Sorry, you're killing me here too.' So it's the same thing — you're not blaming anyone on the bus going back to that time, it's more just that what was societally accepted will change."

Fast fashion, referring to garments produced and sold at cheap prices, has wide-ranging environmental impacts. The fashion industry accounts for about 8%-10% of global carbon emissions, and nearly 20% of wastewater, and 85% of all textiles go to dumps each year.

Mr Ryan added: "The way we really just buy something, use it three times and then throw it out, that's an example of that disposability, I think we will look back at that and think that it's not as classy as buying something really good and wearing it a hundred times."

However, Mr Ryan said Governments must ensure that there are high environmental standards, high employment standards, and higher production standards in place, as the onus cannot be on consumers to choose items that have the least impact on the planet.

The Green Party leader raised serious concerns that there are now just 20 rivers that have "pristine" conditions, down from more than 500 in the 1980s.

The Environmental Protection Agency has raised concern about the impact of wastewater and agricultural runoff in our water quality in multiple reports in recent years.

He said: "One of the things that will really jump out [to

future generations] is how did we allow our waters to be so polluted?"

"How did we go from a system where we had pristine waters to where they were all polluted? How did we miss that?"

"I grew up in an Ireland where those rivers were clean. I grew up in a street where you played on the streets, everyone did. I know that sounds a bit old-fashioned, but it's true."

"It wasn't as if it was all rosy, there are lots of things that are better now. It's just if we let nature go, that's kind of a fundamental loss that undermines everything."

He said Ireland is at risk of being accused of "greenwashing" as we are selling

ourselves as a green brand.

"When Joe Biden was here, his speeches were full of the island of 40 shades of green, and if you look at any of our tourism advertising, or if you look at our food advertising, we are all the time selling ourselves on the basis that we have this beautiful island, which we do, but we have lost a huge amount of nature, we have a real problem in not having looked after our land," said Mr Ryan. "We do have a family farming pastoral system, but we just have to be careful we don't lose it."

News: 4



'A trip to the checkout is now as dreaded as a trip to the dentist'

News: 3

Online registration of births and deaths to be introduced

Elaine Loughlin
Political Editor

Families will be able to register births and deaths online for the first time and official acknowledgment of stillbirths is to be expanded under new reforms.

Social Protection Minister Heather Humphreys has drafted new legislation to give people greater flexibility when it comes to registering major life events.

Under the changes,

families will be able to register a death where a coroner's inquest has not yet been concluded and the time in which a death must be registered will also be cut from the current three-month timeframe to 28 days.

Campaigners have been calling for changes to the system of registering stillbirths to support families who have experienced the loss of a child during pregnancy, while still safeguarding the privacy of families.

The Register of Stillbirths will now be expanded to other relatives of the stillborn child where currently only the parents may search the register and obtain a certificate.

Ms Humphreys said: "Parents and advocacy groups have lobbied for the changes to the stillbirth criteria and for broadening access to the Register of Stillbirths and I am very happy to support them by bringing forward the necessary legislation."

The bill seeks to amend the criteria for the registration of stillbirths to reflect advances in clinical practices and recommendations by the Department of Health.

Current criteria permit registration where the stillborn child weighs at least 500 grammes or reaches a gestational age of 24 weeks.

The proposals look to reduce these thresholds to 400 grammes and 23 weeks respectively.

Other changes will also

address delays in the death registration process, which can create practical difficulties for families who are seeking to manage the affairs of the deceased person.

"I am also bringing forward changes that will enable deaths that are referred to a coroner to be registered before the coroner has determined the cause of death," Ms Humphreys said.

"This will help speed up the death registration process.

"Importantly, it will also enable families of the deceased to register the death and receive a death certificate.

"Currently, the next-of-kin only have access to an interim coroner's certificate."

The Civil Registration (Electronic Registration) Bill 2023 will also enable families to register births and deaths online for the first time.

Since the current civil registration system was intro-

duced in 1864, families have been required to attend before a registrar in person in order to register a birth or death.

Ms Humphreys said the bill, which was approved by Cabinet last week, will modernise the Civil Registration Service and will bring Ireland in line with death registration practices in other countries to ensure that deaths are notified and registered at the earliest opportunity.



Heather Humphreys has drafted new legislation.

State 'like corporates in its legal approach'

■ Bacik: State often twists knife on people at their most vulnerable

Elaine Loughlin
Political Editor

The Government has been called on to end the State's current approach to legal cases, "which is indistinguishable from any faceless private corporate entity".

The Labour Party said new legislation must be introduced to require the attorney general to represent the public interest.

The way in which the State defends cases was recently criticised after details emerged of a legal strategy toward legacy nursing home charges and disability payments.

However, a report from Attorney General (AG) Rossa Fanning found the State had acted "prudently" to settle a small number of claims involving care in private nursing homes rather than risking an adverse outcome in a test case, "which could have provoked many more historic cases, all for the account of the taxpayer".

Labour Party leader Ivana Bacik said that rather than trying to make Ireland a better, fairer place, in litigation like this, advice given to the Government by the AG places a focus on "protecting Government departments' budgets" and "avoiding any concession of liability".

"At present, the State approaches litigation in a way which is indistinguishable from any faceless private corporate entity — it is a war of attrition against those who dare to sue it," said Ms Bacik.

"We have seen it in special educational needs cases; in immigration; in medicolegal cases; in cases taken by those excluded from state redress, including survivors of sexual abuse in schools and those affected by the appalling thalidomide scandal; and in recent revelations about the

removal of disability allowance payments from people in institutional care. When people are at their most vulnerable, often it is the State which twists the knife."

Ms Bacik has introduced a new bill to reform the Office of the AG to ensure that any legal advice provided to the Government has due regard to the vindication of people's rights.

Pointing to the recent lifting of the eviction ban, she said the Government had "leaned heavily" on the advice of the AG, without publishing that advice in full.

"Unfortunately, we have seen several recent occasions where the Government has chosen to simply hide behind the confidentiality of its correspondence with the AG, instead of facing up to the political reasons for which it made a certain decision," said Ms Bacik.

"The most recent and notable instance of this was Government's claim that a temporary extension of the eviction ban might be unconstitutional, a claim which stretches credibility. People in Ireland deserve a Government that has their backs, and it deserves an explanation when the Government chooses to ignore the evidence and pursue policies which may cause them harm. Our bill will go some of the way to ensure they receive that accountability."

She said that with record-breaking homelessness, a dearth of housing supply, unaffordable rents, and adult children living in their parents' box rooms, extending the eviction ban would have been the better course of action to protect people in housing insecurity.

"That's where this bill comes in. It would ensure that the Office of the Attorney General works in the best interest of the public."

Sweet music



The academic women's choir from University of Tartu in Estonia performing during the Cobh Choral Trail at the Cobh Bandstand in John F Kennedy Park as part of the Cork International Choral Festival.
Picture: Jim Coughlan

'Investment in national parks needed'

Elaine Loughlin
Political Editor

Green Party leader Eamon Ryan has not ruled out the compulsory purchase of land as a way of dramatically increasing the size of Ireland's national parks.

Mr Ryan has said he wants the State to begin buying up significant tracts of land that adjoin areas such as Killarney National Park.

He said farmers will be encouraged to plant parts of their land in forestry to meet Ireland's carbon reduction targets.

Mr Ryan said native temperate rainforests need to be restored at scale if we are to protect biodiversity and native species.

"I think there are areas where we can start extending our national parks and creating really special areas," Mr Ryan said in an interview to mark the *Irish Examiner's* sustainability month.



Eamon Ryan wants the State to buy up land that adjoin areas such as Killarney National Park.

"We will put money into that, we need to."

Mr Ryan highlighted 4,900 acres of private land in Glensmole Valley, near the Dublin-Wicklow border, which was put on the market by Nama in 2016.

"I suggested to Michael Ring, who was the minister at the time 'surely we should buy that', which we did for a really good price.

"And now that land is an



local conditions."

Only 2% of the country is covered by native woodland and, according to *The Plant Atlas 2020*, more than half of Irish native plant species are in decline.

Mr Ryan said he would not be against the buying up of land through compulsory purchase order in order to restore biodiversity.

However, he said he does not want to "scare" farmers and other landowners. It would have to work in a way that people have a sense of pride in being part of.

"I am discussing this with my colleagues, and I think we will start to see planning for much, much more ambitious plans around particularly the likes of national parks," said Mr Ryan.

"That's absolutely where we probably have huge potential and potential I mean, it's not just from tourism of local recreation, there's also a value to nature.

"We are selling ourselves

as a green country, we have to be green, in reality, if we want to do that.

"So that type of model where you're looking at where we can purchase land and extend parks and really develop much bigger, more dramatic park areas. I think that absolutely makes sense and is where are we will look to go."

He said there is now a "real opportunity" to reverse the damage that has been done to our environment over the last 50 years.

Mr Ryan said young farmers are the "frontline climate heroes of the future" and must be given financial incentives to diversify.

"The are the one who will be improving water quality, restoring soil health, restoring insect and bird life, the people who manage our land are going to be the key people and we have to pay for that, pay them, through a whole different variety of sources," he said.

Zoned land tax map out today

Sean Murray

More landowners will find out today if they are subject to a new zoned-land tax which the Government claims is an "important component" of boosting housing supply.

The 3% tax is not aimed at raising revenue but to act as an incentive to activate land that could be used for housing, according to ministers.

Dozens of appeals have been made to An Bord Pleanála from landowners who have been included in the original draft map of land subject to the tax.

Today, supplemental zoned-land maps are being published to include further lands identified to fall within the scope of the tax.

Minister for Housing Darragh O'Brien said: "It's estimated that only one-sixth of residentially zoned land is activated for housing during a local authority's six-year development plan period.

"We need to see more suitable land which is serviced and available for housing unlocked for the delivery of homes."

The Residential Zoned Land Tax is a new tax which the Government says is aimed at increasing housing supply by activating lands zoned for residential development for housing.

It also aims to incentivise landowners to use existing planning permissions for housing.

It is charged at a rate of 3% of the land's market value, and operates on a self-assessment basis.

Local authorities initially published a draft map of land falling within the scope of the tax last November, and people will now have until June 1 to make an application to their local authority regarding the supplemental map being published today.

In the last two weeks, An Bord Pleanála has received over two dozen appeals in Cork alone related to inclusion on this register to pay the new tax.

The Government has said homeowners will not have to pay this tax if they own a dwelling which appears on their local authorities' map, where the property is subject to the local property tax.

If a homeowner owns such a dwelling, where the land/gardens/yards attached to it

Irish Examiner



In the swing
Wellness and badassess at Pendulum summit

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Swipe left
Falling out of love with dating apps



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Ronan O'Gara
Barbarians inspired my love of rugby



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Nine FG TDs may quit before election

Griffin and Stanton certain to step down amid feared exodus

Elaine Loughlin
Deputy Political Editor

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar is facing an electoral crisis with up to nine Fine Gael TDs now expected to stand down ahead of the next general election. In a massive blow to the party, Kerry TD Brendan Griffin and Cork East representative David Stanton are now certain not to run. It is thought Fine Gael general secretary John Carroll visited Mr Griffin in his home at Christmas in a bid to convince him to stand in the next election. However, sources close to Mr Griffin say he has made up his mind. Fine Gael has already lost former Education Minister Joe McHugh who, last year, announced that he would not be standing for re-election. It is expected that other members will also announce that they will not be running again. However, some are awaiting the constituency boundary redrawing which are due to be published over the summer.

While some, including Bernard Durkan, Michael Creed, Fergus O'Dowd, and Charlie Flanagan are viewed as having served a full career in politics, party members have sounded alarm that others who are considered as being the "middle generation" in the Dáil are also questioning their futures. These include John Paul Phelan and Paul Kehoe, who were among the loyal supporters of Leo Varadkar and key figures in his leadership election. "The departure of that middle generation would not be ideal. They would be the group who would provide continuity after the next election," said one TD. It is thought that Mr Griffin, who has been a TD since 2011, has told some party colleagues that having to spend considerable time away from his young sons has made him reflect on whether he will seek re-election.

Given the significant personal vote that Mr Griffin has always secured, it is not certain that any replacement candidate put forward by the party would win a seat in the competitive constituency. Party colleagues have spoken with Mr Griffin urging him to change his mind. However, he is among a number of Fine Gael members who have become disillusioned with Mr Varadkar's leadership. "There are people in the party who are just fed up," said one party senator. While family was provided as an explanation when Mr Griffin turned down a junior ministerial role offered by Mr Varadkar before Christmas, those close to him say he also could not promise the Taoiseach he would continue in politics, which had been made a stipulation of any appointment. Asked about a potential departure from politics, Mr Griffin said: "I would not be commenting at this stage on the future. My focus is on doing my job on behalf of my constituents in Kerry."

It is expected that Mr Griffin will make an announcement before the new constituency boundaries are announced, as he does not want his decision to be conflated with any changes that are made. "Many will be waiting until July [when the new constituency boundaries are published]. The likes of Paul Kehoe will be looking at what happens in Wexford, Michael Creed is another man who would be waiting. There are all those dynamics at play," said one senior Fine Gael source. When asked about his own political future, Cork East TD Mr Stanton said: "Every- one is waiting for the new constituency boundaries, I have made no announcement about it." Mr Stanton, who has been a TD for 26 years, said: "The election is around a year and a half or two years away. I am focused on my job at the moment. I am working away in the Dáil and in my constituency."

One TD said he had drawn up a list of red, amber, and green TDs at the start of this Dáil term, with the departed Eoghan Murphy and Mr McHugh on the red list, along with Mr Griffin, Mr Stanton, and Mr Durkan. On the amber list are Mr O'Dowd, Mr Flanagan, Mr Creed, and Mr Phelan. "Frankie Feighan is another man that might not go again," the TD said.

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News: 5

A case of the bends



Contortionist Nicola Moran performs at the launch of this year's Holiday World Show at the RDS in Dublin. After three years, Holiday World Show is back and, from today to January 29, it aims to give visitors a weekend of travel magic. Picture: Arthur Carron

Toddler dies after choking on grape

Eoin English

Gardai are treating as a tragic accident the death of a toddler in West Cork who choked to death on a grape, it is thought.

An autopsy took place on the remains of the two-and-a-half-year-old, named locally as Joshua Odonker, at Cork University Hospital (CUH) yesterday to establish the exact cause of death.

While the results are not being made public, it is understood that Joshua got into difficulty while eating at home in Skibbereen on Wednesday evening and began choking after a grape got lodged in his windpipe.

The alarm was raised just before 9pm and emergency services, including National Ambulance Service paramedics and gardai, rushed to the scene in a housing estate near the town's post office. Paramedics fought desperately to resuscitate him but he was pronounced dead at the scene. It is the second tragic fatality of a toddler in the Skibbereen area in less than a year. Gardai confirmed that they attended a house in the town on Wednesday evening following the sudden death of a young boy.

They said that they were treating the incident as a tragic accident and that foul play was not suspected in the boy's death.

"The coroner [for West Cork] has been notified and a post-mortem will be held at Cork University Hospital," a spokesman said. "Gardai are currently treating the death as a tragic accident and foul play is not suspected. "Owing to the tragic nature of the incident no further information is available."

The results of the autopsy will form a key part of the gardai file which will now be prepared for the coroner's court. An inquest into the boy's death will be held in due course. It is understood that Joshua's family is originally from Ghana and that they are relatively new arrivals in the town, and may have been living in the area for just a few months. Local Independent county councillor Karen Coakley said that while the family was not widely known, the town has been rocked by the tragedy.

"It's hard to comprehend. Everybody is dumbfounded really. The town is just devastated," she said. "It's hard to put into words how the family must be feeling given the tragedy and obviously our deepest condolences go out to them."

Last January, a boy aged 18 months suffered fatal injuries after he was struck by a car in the driveway of a house in the Trallspean a few kilometres outside the town. The boy was transferred by ambulance to Cork University Hospital. However, he was pronounced dead a short time after arrival.

The new charges consist of endangerment on the N40 at South Link Road where he "intentionally or recklessly engaged in conduct, intentionally drove a Ford Transit the wrong way against oncoming traffic and intentionally drove at a gardai patrol car, colliding with it in an attempt to evade capture having failed to stop for gardai when directed to do so, creating a substantial risk of death or serious injury".

News: 6

'Danger to life' in garda car ramming

Liam Heylin

Two charges of endangering life were brought against a man accused of ramming garda cars in Cork City when his partner and six children were in his van.

Garda Paul Dromey formally arrested the accused, a man in his thirties, who had been previously charged with other counts arising out of the alleged rampage, and charged him with two counts of endangerment, one of assault his partner, and a fourth count of dangerous driving.

Garda Dromey said the accused, who has been in custody since his arrest last September made no reply to the charges. Sergeant Gearóid Davis said directions had come through from the DPP for trial on indictment by judge and jury or for the accused to enter signed pleas of guilty at Cork District Court and be sent forward for sentencing at Cork Circuit Criminal Court.

Defence solicitor Frank Buttner consulted the accused but returned to court to tell Judge Olann Kelleher the accused needed more time to consider this issue. The case was adjourned until February 9 for that purpose.

The case arises out of an alleged driving rampage on September 28, 2022.

The new charges consist of endangerment on the N40 at South Link Road where he "intentionally or recklessly engaged in conduct, intentionally drove a Ford Transit the wrong way against oncoming traffic and intentionally drove at a gardai patrol car, colliding with it in an attempt to evade capture having failed to stop for gardai when directed to do so, creating a substantial risk of death or serious injury".

The second endangerment charge relates to City Gate, Mahon, where it is alleged he intentionally drove at gardai to evade capture.

1m VHI customers face higher bills after price hike

David Kent

Over 1m customers are facing increased health insurance bills after VHI confirmed it is hiking its prices. The country's biggest health insurer is to increase premiums by an average of 4.8% from March 1 in a move that could cost a family of four anything from €60 to €270 in additional payments this year.

It comes just weeks after Irish Life Health increased its policy rates, and has prompted speculation that Laya Healthcare could soon follow suit. VHI says the increase is due to the rising demand for healthcare and the rising costs of providing healthcare to customers.

It claimed the increase was "necessary to ensure that VHI can continue to meet the costs of providing healthcare to its customers in 2023 and beyond". VHI noted that demand for healthcare had returned to pre-pandemic levels, which it said reflected pent-up demand due to reduced access to some services during Covid-19 lockdowns.

On its website, VHI claims to have over 1m customers in Ireland. Dermot Goode of TotalHealthCover.ie believes that around half of their customers will not immediately be affected by the increase, as they will have recently renewed their policy.

He said: "A very quick cursory glance at the figures, this is going to cost a family of two adults and two children anything from €60 to €270 in additional premium for the year." "The vast majority of renewals will have taken place between December and the end of February. A lot of consumers will miss this increase and it won't hit them until this time next year.

"To anybody who sees their premium going up, you need to pick up the phone and engage with the insurance companies. If ever there was a reason to shop around, this was it."

VHI insurance managing director Aaron Keogh said: "We understand that our customers are already dealing with the pressure of rising costs across the economy and we have made every effort to keep the price increase as low as possible.

"However, because of these cost pressures, the price increase is necessary." Mr Keogh added that any surplus generated by the company is put back in to "improving services and expanding the care we deliver". He said VHI was committed to ensuring it could innovate how it delivers healthcare in the future.

This is the first price increase by VHI in two years and follows a price reduction in 2022.

Family of four could face price hike of €270 a year.

News: 5

Life/Style

Money&Jobs



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Brendan Griffin, Kerry.



Joe McHugh, Donegal.



Michael Creed, Cork North West.



Charlie Flanagan, Laois Offaly.



David Stanton, Cork East.



John Paul Phelan,
Carlow-Kilkenny.



Bernard Durkan, Kildare North.



Paul Kehoe, Wexford.



Frank Feighan, Sligo-Leitrim.



Fergus O'Dowd, Louth.

Hollowing out of Fine Gael's middle generation

Elaine Loughlin
Deputy Political
Editor



Ahead of any general election, there is always a certain level of natural attrition.

But with up to nine Fine Gael TDs signalling they may not run this far out from an election, Leo Varadkar should be worried.

Most concerning is the fact that many of those on the exit list are politicians who would be seen as having much more to give — both to the party and to politics.

These are in addition to the likes of Bernard Durkan, Michael Creed, Fergus O'Dowd, David Stanton, and Charlie Flanagan, who are

viewed as having served a full career in politics.

Members of Fine Gael are already signalling alarm that those in the "middle generation" are thinking seriously about whether they should stand in the next election. These include John Paul Phelan and Paul Kehoe, both of whom have previously served as junior ministers, and who would have been previously considered loyal supporters of the Taoiseach and key figures in his leadership election.

"The departure of that middle generation would not be ideal, they would be the group who would provide continuity after the next generation," said one TD.

Politicians who already have a Dáil term or two behind them are invaluable to every party, not just Fine

Gael. They act as mentors to newly elected TDs and senators, are known to the general public, and, if in Government, also have the experience to be considered for a senior Cabinet role.

The departure of the likes of Donegal's Joe McHugh, who last year announced he would not be running, and Kerry's Brendan Griffin, who is expected to make a formal announcement soon, hollows out Fine Gael of its middle management level.

But the stepping aside of both of these men in particular, also creates a numbers problem for the party.

Mr McHugh topped the poll Donegal North-East at the 2007 general election, with 22.6% of the first preference vote.

In 2011, Mr Griffin was selected on the Fine Gael ticket in Kerry South as a running partner for sitting

Tom Sheahan. Mr Griffin topped the poll with 8,808 first preference votes, which was over 3,000 more than his party colleague had secured.

While their votes may have fluctuated over the intervening elections, it is clear that both men have a large personal support base and are not solely reliant on the party vote.

With the polls predicting a Sinn Féin surge, these departures would leave Fine Gael vulnerable to losing representation in both Donegal and Kerry.

One senator warned that while Fine Gael are hoping to pick up seats in some constituencies, including Tipperary, Waterford, and Cork South West, these gains could be cancelled out by the level of pre-election attrition.

"If we do that, we aren't

really making gains, we are really just standing still," said one senator.

"We are in trouble in Donegal and Kerry and then we are uncertain in other constituencies of even holding the seat even if people run."

While some of the names swirling around Leinster House are currently on what one TD described as the "amber list" and not quite yet on the "red list", the redrawing of constituencies, due to be published before the summer, will undoubtedly dictate whether some stand down or not.

"Many will be waiting until July, the likes of Paul Kehoe will be looking at what happens in Wexford, Michael Creed is another man who would be waiting. There are all those dynamics at play," said one senior Fine Gael source.

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On the plinth

Elaine Loughlin's take on the political week



Leo wants the trophy but let his team walk off the pitch



Then FG leadership candidate Leo Varadkar at the 2017 Dublin 5k with 'five-a-side group' leader Eoghan Murphy and senator Maura Hopkins. Neither holds elected office any more.

IN TRYING to be the great people-pleaser, Leo Varadkar has shunned his once most loyal supporters, including the infamous five-a-side group who paved his way to the Taoiseach's office.

Under Varadkar's leadership this team has all but disbanded, with one-time captain Eoghan Murphy exiting politics completely; others losing seats amid accusations of not being supported by the party in the 2020 elections; and the last remaining TD, Brendan Griffin, now expected to bow out ahead of the next election.

A number of those who say they put their "head on the block for him" numerous times now feel "very let down" by the Fine Gael leader.

"To me there is no loyalty in him. I would have had a lot of time for him," said one of the original five-a-side group.

It was late 2011 when a group of disgruntled Fine Gael members, unhappy with how the party and its leadership was going about things, began to agitate.

"It was more about retaining some core Fine Gael values within that coalition," said a member of the original group, who used the example of their opposition to the continuation of increments for top public servants at a time when everything else was being cut back.

The first meeting was attended by around 10 politicians but Brian Walsh and Martin Hayden quickly opted out.

It was this casual association of backbench TDs — Anthony Lawlor, Pat Deering, Brendan Griffin, Noel Harrington, Paul Connaughton, Sean Kyne, Sean Conlan, and Eoghan Murphy — who were all first elected in the 2011 election, that would go on to be known as the five-a-side club.

"I suppose in a way that little group of people then would have become disillusioned with Enda [Kenny], so the idea of change was something that over time became more attractive to us.

"The notion that there would be a change in leadership was something that I think was universally adopted by all of us as being something we wanted."

In stoking the Fine Gael fire, they created the environment to allow Varadkar to ascend.

By the summer of 2016, Griffin had come out on national radio to publicly articulate the frustration that many had been venting privately.

The momentum grew significantly at the Fine Gael think-in in Newbridge, Co Kildare the following September when what was described by one TD as a "swarm" of journalists descended on Griffin, Daly, and Deering while they were sitting together in the hotel. All three declared that a change of leadership was required for the good of the party and the country.

Griffin, probably knowing the impact his comments would have, didn't return to the party discussion and instead quickly went up to his room, got his bags, and high-tailed it to Dublin.

As the weeks and months progressed and it became obvious that Kenny's tenure as Taoiseach was running out of time, the five-a-side group worked behind the scenes mustering support for Varadkar but also went out on a limb to move publicly against the then taoiseach.

In early 2017, for example, Deering told RTE's *Morning Ireland* he would table a motion of no confidence in Kenny if he did not set out a timeline for his departure.

As the leadership contest officially got underway, Eoghan Murphy, who was often described as the five-a-side captain, along with John Paul Phelan and Paul Kehoe, became instrumental in sounding out councillors and TDs.

Murphy was responsible for managing the masterplan and Phelan was asked to draw up a "spouses list" for Varadkar so he knew more about those he was hoping to lure inside.

Varadkar claimed the leadership of his party, with 51 of the 73 members of the parliamentary party backing him back in 2017.

So how, after cultivating a tight group of politicians around him, did Varadkar allow his band of supporters to unravel?

"I think he is totally obsessed with what the media might think," said one Fine Gaeler no longer in Leinster House. "I would be of the opinion that you are better off

Did you know?

The Irish language version of the Constitution, or *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, takes precedence over the English text if there is seen to be a conflict between both versions. In 2015, the Government was forced to change the Irish-language version of the wording of the same-sex marriage referendum because of a possibility that a marriage between a heterosexual couple might be found unconstitutional.

standing for something than standing for nothing, but he would try to be all things to all people." This is echoed by others who have arrived into national politics since the elevation of Varadkar, with one politician stating that he focuses on "things that don't really matter". Pointing to an overemphasis on obtaining gender balance and constantly promoting female party members, the politician said Mr Varadkar has let his strongest allies down in order to achieve something that is not remarked upon by the grassroots or the general public on the ground. "Micheál [Martin] is loved across the country and he only has one woman in Cabinet," the Fine Gael source said. While difficult to imagine now, many in the party claim that Murphy would have been seen as a future leader of the party before he was shunted into Housing by Varadkar. "He won Leo the leadership race and then he was rewarded with absolutely fuck all and got no support," said a source who would have been very close to Murphy. They added that while Murphy was "diligent" working 14-hour days in the Department of Housing, "it wasn't a natural fit in any shape or form". Others have said that, not wanting to disappoint more vocal politicians or cause a row with Simon Coveney, he went for the easy option in putting Murphy into an ill-fitting portfolio, which then became a contributing factor in the Dublin Bay South TD leaving politics altogether.

Those close to Deering say the former Carlow TD felt he got little to no support during the election, with Leo Varadkar coming down to the constituency the day before the election when it was too late.

Sources say he felt extremely "hurt" when he was passed over not once but twice for the Seanad, with Michael D'Arcy initially being selected ahead of him and then Maria Byrne being chosen as his replacement when he took up a job in the private sector.

At a recent parliamentary party meeting, Sean Kyne also hit out at the party leadership for the lack of support he received in the 2020 election.

He told colleagues that no effort was made to change the constituency strategy as it was presumed that he would retain his seat even though there were significant local issues.

Meanwhile, Griffin, who is expected to soon formally announce his decision not to run in the next election, has been left somewhat disillusioned after being overlooked for the chief whip position in December.

When Varadkar contacted Griffin to let him know he had lost out just 45 minutes before the Cabinet was to be publicly announced, the Kerry TD told his party leader that he had already been informed through the national newspapers that morning, something which sources say left a very bitter taste in his mouth.

While not officially members of the five-a-side group, having been elected prior to 2011, it worth noting that former junior ministers Phelan and Kehoe, who now sit on the backbenches, are among nine Fine Gael TDs already signalling that they may not contest the next election.

Another supporter, Joe McHugh, has already announced he will not be running in the next election.

Varadkar focuses too much on the "aerial battle" of politics but "neglects the ground war" and the "mobilisation of the troops on the ground", Phil Hogan recently claimed in an RTE interview with Sean O'Rourke.

In setting his sights on the ultimate trophy, Varadkar has let his team walk off the pitch.

From the archives



1933
February 4: Fianna Fáil won its first overall majority in Dáil Éireann. The *Cork Examiner* reported that Frank Aiken was the principal speaker at a "victory demonstration" held by the Fianna Fáil Cork branch on Grand Parade in the city. "Four city bands attended and two torchlight processions, starting from different points in the city, converged on the Parade, and assembled a big gathering despite the inclemency of the weather."



1972
February 2: The British embassy was burned in response to Bloody Sunday. "The embassy in Merrion Square, Dublin, which lay under siege for the past three days, faced its final onslaught of angry protesters yesterday afternoon, when, after about 40 petrol bombs were thrown, it was gutted by fire," a front-page report in *The Cork Examiner* stated.



1972
February 2: Reynolds pledges a more open and caring society

Cabinet will be picked on merit

Politicians may have to declare financial links

IRA say they will not seek to avenge Belfast killings

ORM KITCHENS

Irish Examiner



- **Helen O'Callaghan:** Why parents know best
- **Julie Jay:** I find the sun terrifying
- **Colman Noctor:** Think before you post
- **Aoife Hearne:** Answers your questions



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Catching up fast

Is Cork's underage success a sign of things to come?

Sport Pages 2-3



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Patient rang 999 before dying alone in hospital

Niamh Griffin
Health Correspondent

An elderly woman who died alone in a Cork hospital had made a 999 call to gardai from her ward, asking them not to "forget her".

Alice Donovan, 78, was in the Mercy University Hospital from December 27, 2020, until her death from covid-19 in the early hours of January 30, 2021.

Her daughter Allison McCarthy has been fighting since then to find out what happened during her mother's time in the hospital and what prompted her to phone gardai.

"They've said now my mother was alone when she died. I live four minutes away," Allison said.

Her mum Alice was admitted by ambulance, and over the following days and weeks, it emerged she was facing serious health problems in addition to her lung condition, COPD.

Visiting was not allowed due to covid-19 restrictions at the time, but Allison was in near-constant contact with her mother by phone and regularly spoke with nurses on the wards.

On January 22, she was told her mother had caught covid-19.

Up to that point, only her brother had been allowed in to visit for a few minutes. On January 28, she convinced nurses to allow her in for about an hour, and her sister on the evening of January 29.



Alice Donovan died at the Mercy hospital in January 2021.

"My sister was there until 10.30pm, the nurse told her, 'She's going nowhere, she's too strong' and she left," Allison said.

"I rang at 12.30am and couldn't get through. I rang at 1.30am and couldn't get through, then at 2.15am I rang again."

She was told the nurse in charge of Alice was on break and would call.

"The phone rang at 3.02am and the nurse said: 'Allison, we are just ringing to say your mum passed so peacefully'."

Allison raised the family's frustrations with Mercy University Hospital management, and then with the ombudsman Ger Deering.

The ombudsman's report, issued on May 29, said: "The hospital acknowledges that your mother was alone when she passed away. It says that, unfortunately, this can happen."

"While it tries as much as possible to ensure that family or a member of staff are with patients at the end of life, it can sometimes happen that patients pass away in their sleep."

"Hospital practice is that each patient is checked every 15 minutes. The hospital apologises to you for any upset that this may have caused you or your family."

Until this, Allison believed nurses were with her mother.

"I wanted the truth," she said.

The report also said the Mercy Hospital apologised for the lack of follow-up around a 999 call Alice made.

Some weeks after her mother died, Allison confirmed this call with gardai who played the recording for her and her sister.

"You could hear all the machines beeping in the background," Allison said.

"The last thing she said to him was: 'I'm 78 years of age boy, don't forget about me.'"

A spokesman for the Mercy University Hospital said they cannot comment on individual cases.

News: 2



Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Simon Coveney, in Cork.

Picture: Dan Linehan

'I'm as motivated as I've ever been'

— On speculation that he might not run in the next general election

'I don't believe that we should move to a work permit system that simply allows anybody who wants to come to Ireland to come to work here'

— On work visas

Coveney: I'm not going anywhere

■ Minister will not join mini-exodus from Fine Gael

■ Maintains belief in three-day wait on abortion

Elaine Loughlin
Political Editor

Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment Simon Coveney has put to bed rumours that he will not run or will change constituencies at the next general election.

The Fine Gael minister has said he is loyal to those he has served in Cork South Central for the past 25 years and says he will not be part of an exodus from the party following a number of high-profile departures.

Mr Coveney has denied that disillusionment or fatigue has played a part in the announcements of five sitting TDs, including David Stanton in Cork East, not to run at the next election.

"I've spoken to all of the people individually and I think they all have both understandable and real reasons for leaving.

"It's not disillusionment with politics or anything like that. It's normally family and personal circumstances that I think often isn't fully understood, and that's because they're personal decisions," he said.

Mr Coveney, who was elected to Cork South Central following the death of his father Hugh Coveney in 1998, sparked speculation that he might run in Cork East after recently purchasing the €900,000 Ballynoe House in Cobh, outside his Cork South Central constituency.

"I think it's important to put that into context. I mean, I'm looking at my constituency. I live a couple of hundred yards from Cork South Central," he said when asked if he might not stand as a candidate in his current constituency, which is also represented by Tánaiste Micheál Martin, Finance Minister Michael

McGrath, and Sinn Féin TD Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire.

"I didn't move house just to move constituency", he said, and that the house, set on around six acres, will provide his family with more space.

In a wide-ranging interview with the *Irish Examiner*, Mr Coveney said he has never been more committed to politics but warned that Irish people perhaps don't appreciate the "extraordinary economic success" that the country has gained.

He stands by his insistence on a mandatory three-day wait period for women who have been cleared to access abortion services here.

An independent review of the State's abortion legislation has now recommended the removal of the three-day waiting period between the certification of a termination of pregnancy and the procedure taking

place. "I thought then, and I think now, that a reflection period on a decision as significant as a termination of pregnancy was an important part of the piece of legislation," Mr Coveney said.

"I'd be slow to move away from the balance that was there in that referendum proposition."

Turning to his brief as enterprise, trade, and employment minister, he ruled out any work visa changes for those coming here from Georgia.

Around 20% of all those seeking asylum in Ireland last year came from Georgia, the largest figure for any country.

The EU Asylum Agency has said the invasion of Ukraine has been a key factor behind the increase in Georgian nationals applying for international protection.

Mr Coveney said: "You can't have an open-door migration policy, particularly when you have housing pressures like we have, and when you have population

growth at the pace that we have. We need to be sensible about how we manage that.

"I don't envisage that we're going to do something special for Georgia.

"We shouldn't necessarily crossover people who are coming here seeking international protection with work permits.

"They are two separate systems and we need to keep the separate for good reason."

Read Elaine Loughlin's full interview with Simon Coveney on Page 4

NÍOS

'I am as motivated as I've ever been'



Enterprise, Trade, and Employment Minister Simon Coveney has ruled out running in Cork East instead of his Cork South-Central constituency.
Picture: Dan Linehan

SIMON COVENEY has spent exactly half of his 50 years in politics, and he is not going anywhere.

The Fine Gael TD may have moved to a home outside his own constituency boundary for "family reasons" but he is "loyal" to those he serves in Cork South-Central.

"I think it's important to put that into context [moving house]. I mean, I'm looking at my constituency, I live a couple of hundred yards from Cork South-Central," he says.

Mr Coveney claims he has never been more committed to politics but warns that Irish people perhaps don't realise how good they have it and his party will have to work hard to reinforce that message.

He has also firmly ruled out a coalition with Sinn Féin, saying Mary Lou McDonald's party is "not compatible" with Fine Gael.

"I don't believe that a Fine Gael-Sinn Féin government would last."

The father of three sparked political rumours that he might run in Cork East after recently purchasing Ballynoe House in Cobh.

The departure of long-serving TD David Stanton only added fuel to the gossip flames, as the upcoming vacancy now provides Coveney with an easy transition to Cork East.

However, he strongly rules this out and instead points to a number of very promising councillors in the area who he hopes will "make the choice to step up and run".

He insists the move across constituency boundaries to the five-bed home set on around six acres was solely to provide more room for his family.

"I didn't move house just to move constituency.

"The reason why I moved was for family reasons for my children mainly, but I'm still very connected to Cork South-Central, my office is on the main street in Carrigaline, I'm in and out of Cork South-Central when I'm in Cork all the time and we're as busy as we've ever been in the office.

"I'm as motivated as I've ever been," Mr Coveney says when asked about his intentions for the next general election.

A move to Europe, which has also been speculated after his tenure in the Department of Foreign Affairs, is also off the agenda, at least for now.

"That's certainly not the plan. Who knows what the future holds? I mean, I'd be a fool to just sort-of rule things



Simon Coveney is loyal to Cork South-Central, and is working to promote the message that Ireland is in a good place, he tells Political Editor **Elaine Loughlin**

out categorically, but I don't see myself as a European commissioner in the foreseeable future."

Mr Coveney, while committed to his party, has undoubtedly seen his standing within Fine Gael diminish since losing out to Leo Varadkar in the 2017 leadership race. If he were to make another try for the top slot — he gives the standard answer that there is currently no vacancy — he would likely have younger contenders of Simon Harris, Helen McEntee, and possibly Peter Burke or Jennifer Carroll MacNeill to take on.

His performance in this Government could be described as patchy, having inflicted significant damage on both his own personal reputation and that of Fine Gael with the Zapponegate controversy.

Instead of quashing the matter, he fanned the flames in the summer of 2021 when he suggested that the botched appointment of Katherine Zappone as UN special envoy was "a relatively minor issue" pointing out in a radio interview that he had just come back from Africa where he had been working on human rights issues linked to our role in the UN Security Council.

Coveney, however, did well in Foreign Affairs and gained respect for his quiet but effective approach

around the Brexit protocol issue. But in his current role, he was seen to have judged things wrongly again when in February he claimed Ireland was over the worst of the tech sector layoffs.

Coveney was viewed as one of the more conservative voices around the Cabinet table when a repeal of the Eighth Amendment was being discussed ahead of what would eventually result in a historic referendum result. So much so that some within the previous Government dubbed the insertion of the three-day wait period for abortion services as "the Coveney clause".

This reflection period has again come up for discussion following the publication of an independent review of abortion care in this country.

Last week, the report's author Marie O'Shea told an Oireachtas Committee that there is no legal or medical reason to retain the mandatory wait time and has suggested that it instead be made optional.

When it is put to him that the three-day wait period hasn't worked well, he quickly says: "I don't think anyone has said that it has not worked well.

"I mean, not everybody has been interviewed in relation to people who've had abortions in Ireland in recent years."

He still believes the three-day clause was still the right thing to do.

"I advocated for a yes vote in the referendum on the basis of clarity around the legislation that we were going to pass, and I think that was the right decision now and I think it was the right decision then.

"I thought then, and I think now, that a reflection period on a decision as significant as a termination of pregnancy was an important part of a piece of legislation," he says before adding that he, of course, will have an open mind to listen to counter-arguments.

"But I believe that that was the right thing to do then, and I still think it has an important role to play today."

As Minister for Enterprise, Trade, and Employment, he sees his job as ensuring we continue to have a strong economy where young Irish people have career options when they leave school or college and don't have to emigrate.

But with unemployment figures now at a record low, ensuring the workforce is there to meet demand from employers is a challenge he faces.

He says the first priority is to try to fill roles with Irish

“A move to Europe, which has also been speculated, is also off the agenda, at least for now

people who may be looking for work and he will not be moving to open up the visa system to those arriving here from Georgia.

"I don't believe that we should move to a work permit system that simply allows anybody who wants to come to Ireland to come to work here."

Instead, a "balancing of needs" is required, particularly given the pressures we already have on housing and other services in this country.

He adds: "I don't envisage that we're going to do something special for Georgia. I don't think we should necessarily crossover people who are coming here seeking international protection with work permits. They are two separate systems and we need to keep them separate for good reason.

"You can't have an open-door migration policy, particularly when you have housing pressures like we have, and when you have population growth at the pace that we have. So we need to be sensible about how we manage that."

While housing and health-care are still serious issues that need to be addressed, he suggests that Irish people sometimes don't recognise how good of a place the country is now in.

"The way in which Ireland is seen from abroad is often not reflected in the way in which many people in Ireland see ourselves. I think one of the challenges for the Government is to turn what is an extraordinary economic success story into contentment across Irish society. Ireland is actually doing quite well.

"I think that will be a big focus for Fine Gael going into the next general election cycle."

It's an election that Coveney is very much focused on, despite rumours to the contrary.

"I have no difficulty getting up in the morning to go to work. I'm very driven. I always have been in politics, and I still am," he insists.