

Parents crying out for State childcare

CHILDCARE is in crisis. We are one of the few countries in Europe not to provide pre-school education as standard. What exists privately tends to be tremendously expensive. And a rising birthrate means demand for places that simply do not exist is set to rise sharply.

Yesterday's report from the National Economic and Social Forum ought to spur ministers into finally fixing a problem that thousands of families have known firsthand for years already.

Investing in the first years of childhood is one of the most prudent choices the State could make. Studies have long shown that pre-school education in these formative years work wonders for children lucky enough to enjoy it.

The failure to provide State childcare, particularly from the age of three until the compulsory school age of five, has also meant that single mothers have been much slower getting back into work than should be so. Without readily available alternatives to minding children through the day, the culture of dependency on benefits is often reinforced.

Then there is the separate problem of parents spending child benefit and the generous Early Childhood Supplement – paid to parents for each child under the age of six – for their own benefit rather than their children. Both problems are serious, but can be resolved by making childcare places available universally.

Ideally, parents should be allowed to choose between affordable childcare options, with the Early Childhood Supplement transformed into vouchers to offset or cover the cost, or a place in the State sector. That is for an enterprising minister in the future.

Right now, the Government needs to provide the places parents need directly. Most of Europe did so years ago. Already lagging behind, we should act now to stop a bad situation growing worse.

Alarming turbulence

BASHING Ryanair is a national pastime, but yesterday's evaporation of almost all the airline's profits – along with much of the share price – is unnerving.

True, the company boasts customer service that makes automated answering machines seem preferable and legroom that makes galley ships seem luxurious. But we fly with Ryanair in our millions because it is a remarkably cheap way of travelling.

Even those who find the Michael O'Leary School of Customer Care hard to take should be worried by the possibility that very tough times may lie ahead for the airline.

Competition is as essential in air travel as anywhere else and those who remember the days when a ticket to London cost a month's salary remember the alternative all too well.

It is also a story of Irish entrepreneurial success conquering Europe and liberating hundreds of millions from the misery of unaffordable travel. At times like these we need more such stories, not to see a sad reversal.

Ryanair still needs to clean up its act and polish the rough edges of its business model, but it is in everyone's interest that the firm pulls through – and continues to keep the rest of the industry on its toes.

Free Willie's top lip

WE CAN do better than that! Boyle-sports has sportingly put up €10,000 should Willie O'Dea sacrifice his facial hair for the good of his chosen charity.

Even in tough times, that is a small price to put on the most famous moustache in the country. Surely one of our philanthropists will step forward to make the minister an offer he cannot refuse – and send a charity an appropriately large cheque into the bargain.

It's red carpet for Barroso, Merkel and Sarkozy, red mist for the rest

SINCE the country started considering the Lisbon Treaty, in what feels like the last century at this stage, the Government has hosted a long line of foreign politicians who have come here to call for a Yes.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel was an early visitor to urge support. European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso followed soon with the same message. Then, of course, there was Nicolas Sarkozy last week with his own peculiar blend of charm and menace.

But despite their various differences – Frau Merkel and Monsieur Sarkozy have a notoriously poor relationship for instance – they all share one thing in common. They came here with our Government's blessing to lobby for the Lisbon Treaty.

Alarming

So you have to feel for the organisation Open Europe. Based in London, the group combines a pro-European outlook with a deep distrust of Brussels bureaucracy and the ever more alarming lack of democracy inside the EU.

It is a position, incidentally, that chimes closely with the Irish electorate's own, as the Lisbon vote showed. Yet for the mere act of commissioning an opinion poll here, they have drawn down a rebuke from Micheál Martin they could never have reasonably expected.

According to Micheál Martin, asking the electorate how we would vote on a second Lisbon referendum amounts to 'outside interference in our national debate'. As double standards go, that is one of the more colossal. But there we have it: commissioning a poll is some sort of foreign subversion, while a parade of European dignitaries campaigning here is not.

It would be too easy simply to note that the Government only wants to hear from those who agree with its position on Lisbon, though that is perfectly true. The reality is worse. At the heart of the Government's disarray on Lisbon and Minister Martin's brazenly hypocritical attack lies a real contempt for the views of voters. The double standard at work is unmistakable but it is not even really the point anymore.

Far more serious is the Government's insistence on putting the views of Europe above the views of its own voters. Those various foreign leaders came here to address the Irish people on how we might best vote.



RICHARD WAGHORNE
says Micheál

Martin's attack on the latest Lisbon poll reeks of monumental hypocrisy

Open Europe did almost the exact opposite – they came here to ask our opinion. The first got the red carpet, the second the red mist. It is an unhappy irony that funding a listening exercise is chalked up as an act of foreign sabotage when threatening reprisals for the No vote and demanding a second is not.

The finding of the Open Europe poll, that a second referendum would be roundly trounced, is far less revealing than the reaction it provoked. Is there not something deeply contradictory about a government that continually emphasises the merits of integration with Europe but then brands mere interest in our views from our next-door neighbour as 'interference'?

The greater danger with the EU is that nobody will pay attention to us at all. One would have thought that Micheál Martin and his colleagues would, as pro-Europeans, have been positively grateful that outside groups have taken an interest in Irish opinions.

Then there is that odd streak of Anglophobia that seems to run through the Yes campaign. Fine Gael's youth branch came out during the campaign with the notion that No campaigners were somehow working to hand control of the country back to London. When British MEPs in the European Parliament lobbied after the referendum for the Irish vote to be respected, our lady in Strasbourg, Avril Doyle, responded with a list of historical grievances that put one in mind of Gerry Adams in the old days.

Now Micheál Martin is in on the game, classing the poll as an act of 'British Euroscepticism'. If Micheál Martin were paying more attention he would know that Open Europe, which sup-

ports Europe in principle but opposes its streak of bureaucratic authoritarian, hardly merits the label. But it is not a good day in any case when the supposed British Eurosceptic bogeyman pays more attention to Irish voters than does our own Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Let's not forget the poll was conducted by Red C, possibly the most authoritative polling company in the country. Yet that did not stop Micheál Martin, in a shabby smear unbecoming his high office, rubbishing the finding as somehow tainted, the work of 'a British organisation with a strong ideological bias'.

But surely this is simply another unapologetic double standard? For all the while, the Government is busily working on its own 'study' into the Lisbon result designed to discover the real reasons the treaty was rejected.

Ideological

Funded by the money of the same taxpayers who have already given their verdict on the treaty, the Government's study is an exercise in finding pretexts to put the question again. Presumably, though, if organisations with an 'ideological bias' cannot be trusted to run disinterested surveys, nobody will be expected to pay much attention to the Government's own findings.

If there is something unpleasant about a government using voters' money to tell them what they really think – hint: the actual answer was the referendum result – it is of a pattern with a deliberate strategy of undemocratic deceit waged by the Government since the very start of the Lisbon Treaty campaign.

The documents proving that

the Government conspired with foreign counterparts to suppress the true plans of the EU were leaked during the campaign. They remain a chilling insight into the extent to which our political class is willing to collude with foreign countries to shield the truth from their own electorates, a plot far more worthy of the epithet 'outside interference' than conducting a poll.

The intentions of the French presidency were similarly misrepresented. With French ministers promising that tax harmonisation and military integration would be high on their agenda, the Government stated, despite these on-the-record pledges, that there were no such hopes in Paris.

Interference

Once the result was in, the Government decided that rather than accept the view of the country it would engage in another act of 'outside interference' by allowing Europe to set a deadline for Ireland to 'fix' the problem, rather than straightforwardly announcing that the matter was closed, as it should have.

Now, when the obvious fact that the country will have no truck with the Government's intention to bow to EU browbeating and bludgeon through the treaty by any means fair or foul, the response is to wheel out wholly unjustified labels, smear an organisation with an agenda it does not represent, and revive the old strain of anti-British rhetoric.

But most of all, it is another flat insult to voters. This debate should have been over a long time ago. It ended on June 14, or should have. Yet not content with rubbishing the referendum, the Government now rubbishes the country's view that a second would be unacceptable, as even Eamon Gilmore, who had stood shoulder to shoulder with the Government, now agrees.

We are at the stage now where even a large chunk of Lisbon Treaty supporters are themselves so outraged at the Government's disdain for Irish democracy that they are prepared temporarily to shift position simply to uphold the notion that referendum results count.

The only outside interference at work is the agenda of a European political class that lost a long, open debate on the Lisbon Treaty and which is now trying to subvert the result.

Instead of questioning the good faith of other organisations, Minister Martin should ask himself why he is siding with this sinister effort instead of the electorate he is honour bound to represent.