

Parties mull social status ‘discrimination’

Colin Coyle

Socio-economic inequality may become grounds for discrimination under equal status legislation, the new programme for government suggests. Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and the Green Party have promised to “examine” its inclusion in equality legislation.

All Together in Dignity (ATD), an anti-poverty non-governmental organisation, has lobbied in favour of its inclusion for several years, arguing that many people are being discriminated against because of their backgrounds and socio-economic status.

There are already nine grounds for discrimination in equality legislation in Ireland: gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion, and membership of the Traveller community.

ATD national co-ordinator Mark Hogan believes it is time

to introduce a 10th method of discrimination. “For the countless thousands of people in Irish society who continue to experience this form of discrimination on a daily basis, it is vital this commitment is driven forward by the new government and all political parties into decisive action for legislation,” he said.

Last year ATD, with financial support from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, produced a report based on personal accounts of 60 individuals who believed they were discriminated against because of their status or background. Some claimed their address or accent prevented them from getting a job or accommodation. Others said they were nervous about entering a shop because they might be accused of stealing due to how they dressed. One claimed he was routinely victimised by people who knew that nobody

would listen to his complaints because of his background.

Across Europe, 20 countries have already introduced socio-economic status as grounds for discrimination. The issue was raised here in a 2017 private members’ bill brought forward by Fianna Fail TDs Jim O’Callaghan and Fiona O’Loughlin. The bill was supported by organisations such as the Equality and



Hogan: commitment ‘vital’

Rights Alliance and the Public Interest Law Association.

The bill passed the second stage and was due to go to committee stage but was blocked when the government issued a “money message”, a procedural device that allows governments to block legislation that might require expenditure of significant amounts of public cash.

The Department of Justice has also commissioned research to create “a more precise definition of any new potential equality ground”. It says the research, led by Dr Judy Walsh of University College Dublin, “is being advanced, but the deadline for completion has been extended because of delays arising from the Covid-19 pandemic”.

ATD said it was “vitally important that this research informs public debate to pass the legislation from committee stage to enactment”.

@colincoyle