

RTÉRSA AGM 15th June 2020.

Good afternoon everyone. It's great to be back together. I realise it's been a difficult and anxious time for everyone and indeed a most frustrating time. Coincidentally it is precisely 555 days virtually to the hour since the second application for a pension increase was made to government on the 7th of December 2020.

Happily there is a second coincidence. I am happy to tell you today that the Department have agreed in principle that an increase of 2% should be awarded - but there is a caveat. The department have laid down some conditions which RTÉ must fulfil by August before they can pay this award. However I think it is worth pointing out that it **will** be back paid to the date on which the application was made. I am not familiar with the exact details but we might come back to that later.

Let history record, as the Pope might have said, one outstanding achievement. Eugene Murray stood here some years ago and made a promise that he would do everything he could to get rid of the appalling Noonan levy. He did so. And I have had many calls from similar organisations to explain how we did it. To my knowledge yet, we are unique in having got rid of this burden. Thank you Eugene.

Another matter of concern which is not quite settled as far as we are aware is the question of RTE's application to transfer the management costs over to the superannuation fund. This is an issue which seriously annoyed us particularly since the application was made after a long period of not having any pension increase whatsoever. We had reason to believe that the department were inclined to agree with this proposal so we put in a very strong argument for refusing it. As we pointed out, the costs estimated by RTE, took no account of the increase in management costs that were the inevitable result of moving over to new European rules governing pension funds.

You might well ask what happens to our submissions within the labyrinthine byways of Government departments. When relevant, we have chased correspondence rigorously through Freedom of Information procedures. I had asked one of our members, Eugene Murray, to do this on our behalf and we were particularly pleased recently when we won our appeal to the Information Commissioner for sight of the internal response to our detailed arguments opposing the transfer of costs. Fascinating to see how our own detailed letter was analysed, and I might add, quite rewarding to see.

In my opinion, we might yet win that argument although, no doubt RTE could appeal the decision if it goes against them.

This, by the way, took a few seconds to relate. It took a few months of relentless communication.

For the past few years we have put in an enormous amount of effort in every possible forum, in the Dail, with politicians of every shape and size, from the Taoiseach down with well known mediators etc etc. To the media. In person, by Zoom, in a formidable amount of written submissions. I must add that I am aware from correspondence that lots you have done the same. Thank you.

As you are aware, all our important representations are posted on our website. Its a basic website without pretensions but you will find a very complete history of the past few years therein.

In general, I, and I suspect the whole committee, have become very cynical about the workings of government. Specifically I am enormously angry that retired staff of semi state bodies can have their sole source of income frozen for years by a Government and Senior Civil Servants and their hired guns - NewERA, for years on end by a process of procrastination, dissembling, fudging and total lack of care and professionalism. We accept the Minister's oversight right as established in law, but for people coming towards the end of their lives, we expect decisions in a matter of weeks, not years. In my view, this is a clear case of Elder Abuse. Our updated database indicates that about 210 colleagues have died since the first pension increase was sought and refused.

Shame on you Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

John McGuinness former Chair of the Public Accounts Committee wrote this recently:

*The State trundles on, rolling over the just demands of those citizens damaged by its insouciance and over demands for explanations for incompetence, such as the Children's Hospital or I might add, years of delay in authorising our pensions, (My last 3 words) driven by a determination not to change, explain, or divert.*

*The management of our country and the viability of our democratic institutions depend on the civil service and the Dáil exerting pressure on one another – a healthy tension that balances and prevents an excess of risk-taking, caution, or self-interest, and power by either side. The relationship between senior civil servants and the ministers they serve – if that is the word – might wax and wane in the maintaining of that tension, but*

*the dominance of one over the other can, at worst, lead to rule by a group of autocrats. And I believe we are heading in that direction. (Think NewERA)*

In the view of the Committee, the time taken to make a decision is a clear breach of the Civil Service Code

Section 8: :8.1

Civil servants should:

- *ensure that members of the public have their affairs dealt with sympathetically, efficiently and promptly;*

In this regard I recently discussed the matter with the Ombudsman office. I explained my issue clearly - nothing to do with pensions as such, simply the issue of time taken and decisions made , they agreed I could state a case. Work in progress.

A few years ago, we brought together similar organisations in the semi-states in an effort to gain strength in numbers - a group which I chaired simply because I was sitting in the wrong seat. Mairead de Buitleir, as always, with her magical notebook of contacts was so effective. One thing became crystal clear; retired people In this country, to a surprising degree, lose the right to have their voices heard as a collective when important decisions are being made.

Together with the other semi states, we made a presentation in the Dail in this regard. The leading light in this particular initiative by the way, came from my opposite number in the ESB. Tony Collins. As a result, one politician, Brid Smith, took up the cause and put forward a Bill in Dail Eireann which goes some way to address the problem. It is the Industrial Relations Bill 2021. The Government were careful not to oppose the bill but put a proposal that the Bill be read a second time - that should be next July - to allow for consultation with all parties. 9The technical term for this is Passing the Buck). The Bill succeeded in getting the attention of a very wide range of interested parties who are now co-ordinated under the CEO of the Senior Citizen's Parliament. This bill need your support and that of your TDs.

When I started in this job I made it an objective to improve relations between ourselves and the RTE Superannuation board and with RTE. To this end, I made a point on a number of occasions of expressing our appreciation of the all important task of managing the fund in such a competent manner. Regrettably our overtures seem to fallen on deaf ears and we are still

regarded, it seems to me, as an irritating irrelevance. We have no legal standing is the response. An undertaking last year to enclose a document with the annual "ARE YOU STILL ALIVE" certificate asking members to authorise their contact details being made available to us, did not happen. We had sought the advice of Karlin Lillington The Irish Times expert in such matters and a second legal expert in GDPR. They both expressed disbelief at the RTE interpretation - "after all, they collect membership fees and pass them on". Karlin was a member of the RTE authority for 7 years and suggested a letter to the DG. We did so. We did not receive even an acknowledgement.

For all that, we owe a considerable debt of appreciation to Conor Hayes and the Superannuation Board for their careful management of our investments. The delays in payment of increases is not their fault. And, on your behalf, thank you to your Committee here for all their work.

Let me mention the wonderful Linda Sherlock who died far too early. She was always such a wise voice for me and for the committee. A lovely woman.

Finally a thank you to Brian and Tom who wish to stand down after many years service.

Thank you

Attendance 95 in total. Very good Q & A session followed. Our thanks to Eugene Murray and Charles Byrne for their contributions.

Following this the Chair announced his wish to stand down but agreed to act a Vice-Chair in the interests of continuity. His proposal to elect Stephanie Fitzpatrick as Chairperson was carried unanimously. Carole Corrigan has agreed to continue as Treasurer. Phil Healy, Mairead de Buitleur, Joe Harris and Malachi Lawless agreed to stay on which is much appreciated. They will be joined by Keith Hyland with special responsibility for the Website, digital records, membership database etc.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tony O'Connor". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'T'.