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**Income Inequality Greatest Challenge to New Government says MEP**

Closing the gap between rich and poor in Ireland was the single biggest challenge to the incoming government and this should be the objective of every member of the new Oireachtas. This was the message from the UNICEF report published today according to Independent MEP Marian Harkin.

In a speech in the European Parliament in Strasbourg today, she made the point that one in six Europeans lived in poverty, or at risk of poverty, and commenting afterwards she said that the UNICEF report published today, Thursday, April 13th was a timely reminder of the challenge to the incoming government.

In Ireland she said 3 out of every 10 children suffer deprivation and she welcomed the report in the European Parliament which pointed to concrete measures that could be taken to try to meet the EU 2020 anti poverty targets. “We are all aware that poorer households spend a higher portion of their incomes on household costs such as food, compared with other more affluent households”, she said.

In the European Parliament she put forward practical suggestions to help poorer families, including a winter heating disconnection moratorium, a possibility to extend the Fund for Aid to the most deprived, and measures to reduce energy poverty such as microloans to invest in energy efficiency.

She said that water and sanitation were human rights but that privatisation of those services had a negative impact on poor households. She welcomed Commissioner Thyssen’s proposal on a pillar of social rights indicating that the most profound challenge was to upgrade skills to enable people to secure decent work and decent jobs.

Later, referring to the UNICEF report she emphasised the unacceptability of the fact that currently Ireland had the fourth worst income inequality in the EU. “This is the clear challenge before the incoming government and, hopefully, in the new structure promised the Oireachtas will be able to play a much more effective role in tackling the clearly identified income inequality situation which exists today in Ireland”, Independent MEP Marian Harkin concluded.

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