

TDs unite to seek special deal for Irish in US

The Dáil united last night in calling for a bilateral agreement to legalise undocumented Irish in the United States.

The Government accepted a Fine Gael motion, demanding action on the matter, and agreed to a joint motion.

Welcoming the Government's move, Fine Gael spokesman on community, rural and Gaeltacht affairs Michael Ring said the Taoiseach should visit the United States to lobby on the issue, and also seek the support of the Rev Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness.

The State had a responsibility not to turn its back on the people forced to leave during darker economic times, he added.

"The situation facing undocumented Irish in the US has become more precarious since 9/11, with many of them unable to obtain driving licences, travel to or from Ireland, even at the most upsetting times when they need to attend a family funeral." There were reports of Irish people being targeted, arrested and deported. Six undocumented Irish, one woman and five men, had been arrested in the past few weeks, said Mr Ring.

Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Michael Kitt said the Government believed there were an estimated 25,000 illegal Irish in the US.

"The Government has consistently made it clear that if efforts to pass comprehensive reform legislation were unsuccessful, we would explore all possible alternative options. These options include a bilateral solution."

Mr Kitt added that a number of bilateral possibilities had been advanced, including possible reciprocal initiatives for young people; long-term non-immigrant opportunities for Irish people interested in working on a non-immigration basis in the US and for Americans interested in employment in Ireland.

Deputies, he added, would appreciate that the details of the proposals and discussion would have a better prospect of success if brought forward in private.

Tom Hayes (FG, Tipperary South) suggested that the Australian model, whereby a bilateral agreement was reached between Australia and America, be used. "Not only do I hear of Irish emigrants trying to have a real and complete life in the US, but I often encounter American people who wish to live and work here."

Dinny McGinley (FG, Donegal South-West) said that few groups had contributed more to the building of America than the Irish.

Labour foreign affairs spokesman Michael D Higgins said the most painful aspect of the situation was that families were cut off from each other because of the illegality of the Irish in the US.

Sinn Féin spokesman Martin Ferris said that those involved were forced into "a twilight zone", in which, although hard-working and law abiding, they were forced to lead the lives of outlaws.

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