

Speech by Michael Finneran T.D.,
Minister of State for Housing, & Local Affairs,
at the launch of the
2008 Annual Report of
The Private Residential Tenancies Board,
O'Connell Bridge House, 28 September 2009

Ladies and Gentleman, Board Members, Oireachtas colleagues and distinguished guests, it is sobering to consider how quickly the environment within which we operate has changed since the early days of 2008.

The global economy has been pummelled, old financial certainties have been shattered and governments the world over have battled night and day against the most severe global economic depression since the period of the Wall Street crash. Here in Ireland the Government is plotting a

course laced with difficulties but we are determined to act decisively in the long-term interests of current and future generations of Irish citizens. With hard work and determination, we will get through these difficult times and onto a path to economic recovery and renewal. This will not be easy. There may well be false dawns before the darkness passes. However, if we as a nation take the correct decisions over the next few months we will return to a sustainable model of growth and social prosperity.

Turning now to the business at hand, I am very pleased to be here with you today on the occasion of the launch of your Annual Report for 2008. We gather to look back at a year of great change, challenges and achievements for the PRTB. 2008 saw a large and welcome increase in the PRTB's core staff complement. It also saw a new Director, Anne Marie Caulfield, and ushered in a series of critical policy initiatives that will – we hope – further enhance the operational

effectiveness of the PRTB. Mistakes of a procedural nature were also made in 2008 but, crucially, the mistakes were recognised, lessons were learned and steps taken to avoid them in the future. Alexander Pope wrote that to err is part of the human condition and is eminently forgivable; what would be unforgivable would be a refusal to learn from past mistakes.

All in all, looking at the macro and micro perspectives, I am reminded of the words of Charles Dickens when he wrote:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness . . . it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way”

As Minister for Housing and Local Services, I sincerely hope that we will manage to steer a middle course between these extremes!

In the case of the PRTB, I look forward to this organisation building on the progress it has made and continuing to strive for further improvements in the service it delivers to its customers.

Review of 2008

The key input in any organisation is its people and I am pleased to recognise the tremendous dedication of both the staff and the Board Members of the PRTB. The Board met very regularly in 2008 and provided real strategic leadership in a range of areas. One of the fruits of that leadership is the Board's 2009-2011 Corporate Plan which I launched in this very room last December.

Flowing on from that plan is the ICT Strategy which will optimise the PRTB's abilities to deliver on its remit in as efficient a manner as possible. It is a fact of life now that additional staffing resources are not available to the public sector. Indeed, the opposite is the case and public bodies have to explore every avenue that can lead to delivering the same – or more – services with fewer human resources. It is a source of satisfaction, and some relief, to me that my Department was able to secure 14 additional permanent staff for the PRTB in early 2008 and that those people are now all in situ here. Notwithstanding this, I recognise the heavy administrative burden that impacts on the PRTB staff and I trust that the ICT strategy will unlock the full potential of the organisation.

The Chairman has comprehensively outlined the progress that was made in 2008 regarding both the volume and the delivery times of the PRTB's key functions. Much has been

achieved and more remains to be done but I am confident that the PRTB has a clear strategy in place to bring its processing times more into line with broader service expectations.

However, it is important to recognise what has already been achieved since 2004. A framework has been created for the better regulation of the private rented sector and for the development of a more mature sector that recognises the rights and responsibilities of tenants and landlords. A simpler and far more accessible approach to the resolution of disputes than existed in the Courts is now in place and, overall, key supports are in place to allow for the growth and maturing of the private rented sector.

The PRTB has been something of a victim of its own success; under the former local authorities' registration system, no more than 30,000 tenancies were ever

registered. I understand that today the figure is in the order of 220,000 tenancies. The administrative burden has been heavy and it is to the immense credit of the PRTB staff that they maintain such a positive and enthusiastic outlook to their work. This is a real credit to the management team so capably led by Anne Marie Caulfield and, before her, by Margaret Taheny-Moore.

Challenges Ahead.

Turning to the future, the successful implementation of your ICT Strategy is a critical priority. My officials have reported very positively on the approach being taken to the strategy including, in particular, your successful use of skills elsewhere in the public service. The personal time commitment of staff members to the Tender Selection process currently ongoing is also noteworthy.

Looking at your Corporate Plan, I am delighted to see you setting very specific targets, accompanied by clear performance measurement indicators. Measurement is critical and it will allow the PRTB, hopefully, to point to further concrete improvements in service delivery when we gather next year to launch the 2009 Report. The Board will ultimately be judged as to whether it delivers its core business in as timely a manner as possible. This will go to the core of the credibility of the organisation and I am confident that we are all working towards the same goal.

Good financial management is, of course, always a priority but especially so now in the current economic climate and I am pleased to note the positive assessment in this regard by the Comptroller and Auditor General of the PRTB's performance. As for wider funding issues, I have made significant changes to the PRTB's funding arrangements over the last 12 months to move it much closer to a self-

financing status and this is a situation that I will keep under close review in the months ahead.

You will all be aware that I am committed to a Review of the Residential Tenancies Act with a view to enhancing the operational efficiencies of the PRTB and to ensuring that the Act best supports the Board in the delivery of its functions. I hope to be in a position to outline preliminary outcomes of that Review later in the Autumn. The public consultation process – to which many in this room have contributed - and my Department's own research has identified a series of issues that merit detailed consideration. While I cannot prejudge things I think it's fairly clear that there will be a need for specific amending legislation and this is something on which my officials will liaise closely with the PRTB. The PRTB has, both recently and over the last number of years, submitted detailed and comprehensive suggestions for

legislative review and these will be a critical input to the overall Review.

I also understand that the PRTB is soon to consider research it has commissioned in the area of deposit retention and I look forward to receiving the Board's policy advice in that regard. Deposit retention is an issue with the potential to damage the credibility and good working of the private rented sector, and this is also true of overholding and non-payment of arrears. These will certainly be issues that will be considered in depth in the context of the Review of the Act.

Conclusion

As we look back on the issues encountered in 2008 and consider the challenges in the years ahead I am mindful of the fact that the terms of Board membership of a large number of the PRTB's Board members come to an end in

two days' time. I, and Minister John Gormley, have put a lot of thought into future appointments and I expect that they will be announced imminently.

However, whatever the final composition of the new Board will be, I can only hope that it will have the same commitment, expertise and engagement that this Board has shown over the last few years. A huge part of the credit in that regard is due to your Chairman, Tom Dunne, who has brought the PRTB from its genesis as a modest Commission to the robust and forward-looking public body in which we are now gathered. To you Tom and, indeed, to all your fellow Board members I say "well done" and I now commend to you all the 2008 Annual Report of the PRTB.

ENDS