



Department of Social and Family Affairs

Fianna Fail Ard Fheis, October 2006, Speech By Séamus Brennan, T.D., Minister For Social Affairs

Fellow Delegates, 80 years ago when Fianna Fail members assembled for the Party's first Ard Fheis it was in an Ireland that was light years away from the vibrant, prosperous and self-confident country we have today. The 1920's were a time of new beginnings, of bleak economic prospects, of great uncertainty.

From that Ard Fheis came the message that Fianna Fail, the Republican party, stood for social justice, for equality for all, for protecting and supporting the weakest. That commitment to the philosophy of social justice has shaped and driven Fianna Fail.

In the 80 years since, day in-day out, week in-week out and year in and year out, Fianna Fail has remained loyal to its pledge and to its principals of constantly striving to protect and support the less well-off, the weakest in society, to recognise and reward our older people and to cherish equally all the children of the nation.

But let us never forget that throughout the decades, through the many difficult times and now the good times, Fianna Fail's pledge to protect the most vulnerable and marginalised has never wavered. I know you will all agree when I say that commitment remains solidly at the very core of what Fianna Fail stands for. It is what makes Fianna Fail the people's party.

We all know that this country has been transformed by Fianna Fail in Government. Our economic success is the very bedrock on which Ireland is thriving and expanding. But economic growth on its own is only part of the bigger picture that is 21st century Ireland. Our legacy to this country, and to the generations that follow, will be judged on how well we used the Celtic Tiger era of economic prosperity and opportunity. Somehow, I don't think they will judge us on how many millionaires, even billionaires, we created during our time in that economic oasis. Instead, and rightly so, they will judge us on how we reached out, and reached down to those left behind, for whatever reason, by our buoyant economy.

And I also believe, fellow delegates and I am sure you will echo my belief, that at the end of the day we will also all be judged on how well we hung onto the decency, the



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respect and the humanity that is so central to all that is best about Ireland and about being Irish. These are the new challenges in 21st century Ireland. How well we in Fianna Fail respond to these challenges will be our legacy. I, for one, am confident, as I am sure all of you are, that Fianna Fail will not be found wanting.

It will not be found wanting because Fianna Fail in Government is harnessing those fruits of economic success to lift all boats. It is doing so on a scale never before seen in this country. This Government is delivering the largest sustained increase in social and welfare services in our history. We are delivering on the target of €150 per week for the lowest welfare rates. This year, alone, welfare benefits and vital supports increased by almost four times the rate of inflation.

This year my Department of Social Affairs is spending €14 billion on welfare entitlements. That is double what was being spent as recently as the year 2000. What that €14 billion means is that for every €3 of taxpayer's money the State will spend in 2006, €1 will go directly towards welfare supports and services. It means that those rearing children have seen a four fold increase in Child Benefit in just 10 years. Add to that the new €1,000 annual subsidy for children under six. It means, for example, that a family with three children under 6 years will receive direct financial support of €8,800 a year-an increased of almost €7,300 since 1997. It means a sizeable lift for those on lower welfare rates. It means our pensioners are far better off. It means that up to 30,000 carers are having their valuable work recognised with an increased and extended benefits and supports. It means that those in job seeking situations, including Lone Parents and those with disabilities, are benefiting from new increases, supports and incentives. It means that every week, the length and breadth of this country, almost one million welfare payments are reaching those who need them most. It means that well over 1.5 million men, women and children are provided with welfare and financial lifelines. Lifelines that allows them to live with greater dignity and security.

Fianna Fail is a party that stands for progressive change. Fianna Fail has brought this country a long way down the road towards a society that is caring, compassionate and enlightened. But we have still a distance to travel. And Fianna Fail has never been a party to rest on its laurels. Our focus has never been only on



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what we have achieved, important as that is to the lives of so many people. Our focus has always been on what we have yet to achieve.

The easy way out is to make the welfare payments and then hope the social problems go away. Let me assure you that is not the Fianna Fail way. It never was. And it never will be.

Fianna Fail has always been a party to embrace change. A party not afraid of reforms when they were needed. A party always bubbling with new, and often, radical ideas. A party driven by the desire to ensure that the great rising tide of Celtic Tiger success lifts all of our people. That is why we are confronting the social issues that consign too many to lives of welfare dependency. In the year or so since I spoke to you last I have been up and down this country and I have listened to what you told me. The improvements and changes you wanted to see. You have told me that we must always put the children of this nation first. And we have.

Since Bertie Ahern first walked through the doors of the Taoiseach's office less than a decade ago more than 250,000 people have been lifted out of poverty. Well over 100,000 children have been taken out of hardship and deprivation. Now we are targeting the measures that will for once and for all make child poverty in Ireland history. Child poverty is most deeply imbedded amongst the 130,000 children of Lone Parents on welfare. I am now advancing reforms that will liberate thousands of Lone Parents from welfare restraints. Reforms that will open up employment, training and education opportunities that will benefit and give fresh hope to the parents and to their children. We are targeting further resources at low income families by increasing the Family Income Supplement thresholds. For a family on the minimum wage of €16,000 with one child, FIS can boost their income with a top up of over €5,000 a year, it rises to €9,000 for a family with three children.

We have made great strides in helping parents struggling with back to school costs, increasing the allowance by €40 and widening the disregards. And we will do more for them. You told me that in a 21st century Ireland awash with money we can no longer accept the blight of child poverty.



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You were right. It must end. And you and I together will end it.

You told me that our pensioners must be recognised and rewarded.

They were the people who kept this country afloat through the decades of recession and stagnation. They deserve to have dignity, security and comfort in their later years. And we in Fianna Fail pledge that their contribution will be recognised and rewarded. We have implemented the largest series of pensions increases in the history of the State. In less than a decade we have increased pensions by up to €93 per week—three times ahead of price increases and almost double gross industrial earnings. We are committed to delivering a State pension of at least €200 per week by 2007. In recent months a new enhanced State non-contributory pension has lifted up to 30,000 pensioners to their full entitlement. Pensioners for the first time can up to €100 a week and still keep their full pension. All peak time travel restrictions on pensioners have been abolished. A seamless, All-Island free travel scheme, North and South, is just a few months away. We have banished the term “old age” from pensions—from now on it’s the State Pension. And in recent months when energy prices rocketed, we responded to protect our older people.

Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, Minister Brian Cowen and myself did not wait for the Budget or for a new Bill. Instead we immediately increased the Fuel Allowance and the unit allowances for electricity and gas. And we are expanding and improving non-cash benefits under the Household Benefits package. For example, older people will for the first time be given the option to have a paid for mobile phone instead of a fixed landline.

We are also confronting serious issues for those for whom retirement is some way away. Right now many are facing totally inadequate incomes in their later years. Out of a workforce of 2 million, some 900,000 people, 500,000 of them women, have no personal or work pensions. We could stand back and say “so what if they head into retirement with only the State pension. That’s their problem”. But that is not the Fianna Fail way. We are now bringing about the needed reforms. In the coming months the Government will publish a Green Paper that will chart the way for lasting solutions on pensions. Solutions that will give everybody a decent pension and well deserved security in their later years.



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Let me say wholeheartedly that I share your admiration for Carers. Carers do so much for so many. In return, I am committed to doing more for them. The Carers Allowance has been increased to €200 per week-making it the largest single welfare benefit. Well over 30,000 carers are now receiving the increased €1,200 annual Respite Grant. Over the coming months the first National Carers Strategy will be published. It will be the blueprint for the future provision of services, supports and entitlements for carers. Carers make a valuable contribution to our society. We recognise and salute that dedication and sacrifice. We will care for the carers.

Our welfare systems and services are being modernised. We are bringing forward more enlightened social policies. Policies that embrace change and reflect the needs of our ever evolving, and increasingly multicultural, modern 21st century society. Policies that put people first. Policies that strive to make sure that the talents and ambitions of no individual is overlooked or neglected.

For example, this week I have been putting through on the floor of Dail Eireann the Citizens Information Bill. This legislation will give every person in this country with a disability the right to a personal advocate to help them through the bureaucracy to their rightful benefits and supports. So often information can break down barriers, ease anxieties and open up opportunities.

This Bill also paves the way for the delivery of a new customer friendly national information and rights service under one clear brand-Citizens Information.

Another piece of legislation that will soon be ready will strengthen and equip MABS to deal with the growing debt problems those on welfare and low incomes are finding themselves in.

And constantly we are building up supports and services in areas of disadvantage. An example is that by the end of this year we will have delivered on the commitment to fund and open 100 resource centres countrywide.



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In conclusion, let me state clearly from this platform - Fianna Fail is the party that leads. The party that shows real leadership. And let's never forget what Fianna Fail stands for. It stands for a fairer, stronger Ireland, for a socially inclusive society, for a 32 county 'New Ireland' achieved by persuasion, for strong economic development, and for a national cultural identity within an expanding European Union. In every generation when Fianna Fail was called upon it provided solutions to this country's problems. Since I first appeared on this platform as General Secretary, I have seen it. And over the years since, as a Minister in eight separate Government Departments, I have seen it.

It is as true today as it was decade after decade all the way back to 1926. Fianna Fail made the difficult decisions. They were not always popular but they were what was right. Time and again Fianna Fail righted the direction Ireland was taking. And they won the admiration and respect of the Irish people. That is now what this party must do for the future. Look at the issues of the day. It must confront the new problems. And I must come up with the solutions and chart the road forward.

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