



Address by

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to

BMW Regional Assembly

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Co. Roscommon

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**MINISTER TELLS BMW ASSEMBLY THAT REGION IS
INCREASINGLY VIBRANT AND SELF-CONFIDENT**

***Brennan Says Legacy Of This Generation Will Be
How It Harnessed Economic Success To Help Most***



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Thank you for your invitation to address this important and timely conference on Social Inclusion and Equality and how it impacts on the future of the Border, Midland and Western Region.

I see that you have assembled an impressive list of speakers to explore how to best deliver a fairer economy and a fairer society in the 13 counties that make up the region. I welcome this opportunity to first of all salute the work of the BMW Regional Assembly over many years. The dedication, leadership and commitment of Assembly members has been pivotal in the shaping of improvements and developments in the region.

Today, in every part of the country, we are witnessing the new and vibrant Ireland as it gets into its stride. The Ireland of today is one of unlimited opportunity, with hugely exciting potential. It is a country striding confidently forward as an equal to other nations. It is a country that inside a few short years has gone from "can't do" to "can do". The counties in the BMW, and the region itself as a whole, have shared in this remarkable economic growth, job creation and expansion that day in, day out is transforming the country.

To fully appreciate just how far this whole country has come in a relatively short time it is always useful to dwell for just a moment on where we have come from. It is very easy to forget just how bleak the picture appeared to be for this region and our country less than three decades ago. I don't need to remind most of you here of the Ireland of the 70's and 80's. Of how the West, the Border counties and the Midlands struggled. Of how one person in every five in the State was without a job. Of how the crisis in our finances was so alarming that there was talk of asking the World Bank to intervene to rescue us. Of how emigration, especially from the Western regions, drained us of our youth. Of how the household names at that time were those of liquidators and receivers who appeared day after day on our TV screens preparing to dismantle and disperse companies in trouble. All that was going on against the backdrop of a country and a society that was insular and introspective.

Contrast that with today's Ireland. Every day we are edging closer to full employment with a workforce of over 2 million and an economy that is growing faster than any other in Europe. Not alone have we as good as filled all jobs but the



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Central Statistics Office forecast is that we will need some 50,000 immigrants each year for the next 12 years, in addition to our home grown supply of workers, to keep pace with the employment requirements of an economy in full stride. Now projected economic growth is for 6% per year for the foreseeable future.

Our expectations as a nation have soared. Years ago a millionaire was a rare species in Ireland and probably merited an appearance on the Late Late Show. Today we are turning out millionaires by the day. Of course, it is true to say that the rising tide of economic buoyancy has over recent times lifted most boats in the harbour.

But it is also true that, unfortunately, some boats got left behind. The income gap has widened. Some regions did not prosper at the same rate as others. The result is that too often those most vulnerable and marginalised in society have been left struggling on the edges. And this is despite the fact that, for example, welfare benefits, entitlements and supports have increased solidly year after year.

The transformation that Ireland has undergone in a relatively short time span has generally impacted favourably on the BMW region. And it is important in the interests of everyone, and especially those who contributed to the resurgence of this region, to acknowledge just how far we have come.

The tide of emigration that plagued the region and drained it of its young people for decade after decade has been halted and reversed. Today, there are jobs opportunities to entice the young people to stay in the region. Employment grew last year at over 3%. Enterprise Ireland, as one example, informs me that between 2000 and 2005, over 21,000 new jobs have been created in their client companies in the region. Last year's annual report shows that over 600 companies in the region received support for fresh strategy assessment, more than 400 projects were approved for production expansion, 93 new projects were started and over 500,000 sq feet of community enterprise space was provided.

A good infrastructure network, as we all know, is pivotal to the ongoing expansion of the BMW region. Investment in national roads in the BMW region for 2000 to 2005



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amounted to €1.5 billion. In that time 10 major projects have been completed, including the M1 Dundalk Western Bypass, N4 Sligo Inner Relief Road, N2 Carrickmacross Bypass, N6 Loughrea Bypass and the M4 Kinnegad/Enfield Bypass, N55 Cavan Bypass Link and N15 Ballyshannon/Bundoran Bypass. The N4 Edgeworthstown Bypass is due to open later this month.

And it must also be acknowledged that the work that is progressing on the major inter-urban routes will have a positive impact for all regions, including the BMW, and is aimed at ensuring that critical bottlenecks all along the roads network are dealt with. Total expenditure on national roads in the BMW region for 2005 was €416 million and this again reflects the major pickup in road building activities in the Region in recent years.

As you all well know, the BMW covers almost 50% of Ireland's landmass but contains just over 27% of the population. However, it is interesting to note how this region compares with the Dublin, the country's main centre of population. The populations of both regions are over 1 million. The numbers unemployed in both regions are hovering around the 4.3%. The numbers who are in receipt of welfare supports at over 23% is lower in Dublin but the gap is not that wide. I know there are many areas where the gap is wider but overall it is no longer a case of the BMW region being perceived as the poor relation of Dublin. Of course, one big difference is that here there are areas that are sparsely enough populated.

The result has been that many people have suffered from isolation and a feeling of social exclusion. Considerable resources and specific supports and services have been targeted for some time now at tackling poverty and exclusion.

And we are making considerable progress. In less than a decade more than 250,000 men, women and children-many from the BMW counties- have been lifted out of poverty and given new opportunities and hope for the future. Over 100,000 of these were children who were taken out of hardship and given fresh starts and the prospects of more fulfilling lives. Because it is unacceptable in 21st century Ireland that any of our pensioners should find themselves in a poverty situation, in less than



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a decade the State pension for older people has been doubled and is now on the brink of reaching €200 per week.

Employment is the best route out of poverty and the gradual and consistent growth in jobs in this region is helping to tackle levels of hardship. Overall, welfare entitlements and supports have risen significantly, almost doubling over the past six years. Right now we are spending over €14 billion a year on social supports and payments, or €1 for every €3 the State spends. By any standard, the progress we have made in a decade or more has been spectacular. But we still have a distance to travel.

There are many challenges ahead for the BMW region, and for the country overall. Of particular importance to this regions will be the next National Development Plan.

I know that the Assembly met in recent months with the Taoiseach to set out your priorities for this blueprint for the future and also the central importance of incorporating the National Spatial Strategy into this plan. As you are the people in the area who know best what is needed, I would urge you to continue to press home your case as a way of ensuring that balanced regional development is achieved.

A central theme of Transport 21 is connectivity. For the BMW region this means a commitment to the upgrading of the N2, N3, N4 and N5 which will greatly road links to and from the region. On the issue of Structural Funds, Ireland will receive €811 million for the period 2007-2013. This will deliver a minimum investment of over €420 million for the BMW region for further infrastructure improvements. Good quality road access to the BMW is of critical importance. So also is improved public transport access, and this is happening.

As Minister for Transport I instigated a full assessment of the viability of re-opening the Western Rail Corridor. The report of that Working Group saw considerable merit in a phased reinstatement of the line. I note in recent days that one prominent transport commentator appeared to pour cold water on the whole idea.



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There has never been any doubt as to where I stand on this issue. I fully support the concept and see it as strategically important in connecting centres of population in the West. I can assure you that I will continue to support the lines development at the highest level. Access and connectivity in modern 21st century Ireland must also include the widespread availability of Broadband and access to the internet.

One of the biggest and most urgent challenges we face over the coming years is to eradicate the unacceptable blemish of child poverty, and all elements of real poverty. Child poverty is particularly prevalent amongst Lone Parents, in low income families and where there is unemployment. I am now bringing forward reforms that will specifically address the difficulties many of the country's 80,000 one parent families – including over 18,000 in the BMW region-encounter in areas such as access to employment, education and training, income supports, childcare, and cohabitation rules.

Ensuring that the talents or contributions of none of our citizens are overlooked or neglected is another major challenge. The reality is that over 200,000 people have come from the 10 new EU countries in the past two years and have found employment here. The latest statistics show that less than 1% of these people have ended up on welfare payments.

On the other hand, there are currently just under 160,000 people signing on the Live Register at present. While the majority of those will leave the Register within one year, the reality is that too many others are falling into long-term unemployment.

Many of the 80,000 lone parents I mentioned need support and encouragement if they are to find a route to rewarding employment. In addition, I'm sure there are many who are in receipt of short-term illness benefits who would welcome intervention and support.



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I am currently progressing reforms that will offer encouragement and activation so that in an economy as successful as ours we do not overlook the employment contribution that any individual can make.

The need for our people in their later years to be able to retire with dignity and with security is of paramount importance. Some of our most vulnerable older people are the men and women on Non-Contributory State pensions who receive less every week than those on Contributory pensions, and are also subject to employment restrictions. I note that over 40% of all those now on these pensions live in the BMW region.

In the last Budget I took a first step towards closing the pension's gap and also increased the earnings ceiling from €7 to €100 a week for Non-Contributory pensions. I am determined to continue to work towards improving the incomes, and opportunities, for these pensioners.

The Government's decentralisation programme will also bring further benefits to this region. The reality is that decentralisation will take time. But I have no doubt but that a sensible, voluntary, agreed phased programme will be achieved.

Since the State was founded successive Governments have managed to implement successful decentralisation programmes. My own Department of Social Affairs is a prime example of this. Out of a total workforce of some 4,000, over 1,000 are now working in decentralised offices in your BMW region- in Letterkenny, Sligo, Longford and Dundalk. After that success, plans are now advancing for Carrick-on-Shannon, Carrickmacross, Donegal Town, Bunrana and Monaghan.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me say that the BMW is a region that you can be proud of. It is not some isolated, far-flung, region that is somehow out of step with the rest of the



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country. It is a vibrant, living, successful and self-confident region that is at the very heart of modern Ireland. It is a region that is to the forefront in influencing the shaping of policies for the future.

In the past, emigration drained the lifeblood out of much of the region. The men and women of the 13 counties, and especially those from the Western seaboard, left but did not forget. They sent home the monies that helped keep this country afloat during the bad times. And that also helped to build the launching pads for later economic progress.

In many ways, we today are standing on the shoulders of these courageous people. Later, when again we needed bold vision and courageous decisions, it came from the heart of the West. It came through the vision of Mons. James Horan of Knock.

In the year Knock Airport opened Ireland had the highest debt per capita in the world and a new record was set for levels of emigration. Our airways were full of talk about the supposed end of rural Ireland and the collapse of the West. It was in this landscape of despair that Mons Horan's brave project stood out as a bright symbol of hope. It was the kind of vision and determination that inspired and continues to inspire.

So today we are standing in the doorway of the 21st Century. It is a good time to consider how the generations that follow will look back and judge us. They will look on us as the people who had a grasp of the Holy Grail of economic success, wealth, full employment and endless opportunity. Most of all they will judge us on how we used that prized possession.

Somehow, I doubt they will be too impressed by 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 harnessed that unprecedented splurge of wealth to reach down and lift up those who had been left behind by our buoyant economy. How we reached down and lifted children out of distress. How we lifted lone parents



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out of a social stigma and gave them hope for the future. How we created the jobs and opportunities that allowed our young stay at home. How we recognised and rewarded our older people. At the end of the day, how well we respond to these challenges will be our legacy.

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