

THE FAIR SOCIETY

Speech by Pat Rabbitte TD Leader of the Labour Party

To the Party's National Conference, Killarney, Co Kerry Saturday May 10th, at 8.30 pm (as delivered on RTE)

Delegates and Friends,

I would like to talk to you tonight about Labour's vision for a Fair Society. I want to talk about how Labour will forge a contract with the Irish people to build that Fair Society. I want to make it clear that Labour will defend the public realm, and that Labour values reject the sort of society reflected in the selfish prism of this PD/FF Government.

First I want to acknowledge the dynamic that has attracted 1,000 new members into our Party since our leadership election – a fact reflected in this packed hall tonight. We are here united, and as purposeful as at any stage in our history. *We need to be*, if we are to rid our country of an arrogant and incompetent Government.

I would also like to start by acknowledging the help and advice of my predecessor in my first six months, and to salute the distinguished contribution to the cause of Labour and Ireland of *Ruairi Quinn*.

To people watching at home I say this: if you didn't know before the General Election you know now: *Fianna Fáil bought your votes with your own money*.

Looking back at the Fianna Fáil manifesto, who could blame people for voting for 200,000 additional medical cards? Imagine the comfort that those medical cards would have brought to so many low-income families, fearful of going to the doctor because they simply can't afford it?

Who could blame people for accepting the promise from the Taoiseach himself of 2,000 extra Gardaí? Parents afraid for the safety of their teenagers at weekends were crying out for a visible Garda presence. Who could blame people for finding hope in Mr Ahern's promise to eliminate hospital queues within two years?

What happened after the election? Not one medical card delivered. His Government every week forcing the closure of more hospital beds – a scandalous 250 this week alone. And the 2,000 Gardaí have turned out to be a mirage.

Last May, all over Ireland, Fianna Fáil candidates delivered personal letters to households, pledging that local schools would be refurbished, classrooms added or sports halls provided. Hundreds of schools and communities were shamefully deceived.

Fianna Fáil promises now have the same value as a failed Lotto ticket. Parties setting out to con people on matters as fundamental as health and education don't deserve to hold office.

And they certainly don't deserve to be returned. If they were to win the next election, they would be heading towards a quarter of a century in office, with only one short interruption. To paraphrase a Michael McDowell poster – *"twenty five years of Fianna Fail-led Government – No Thanks!"*

And what of the promises they never made, but are implementing anyway, with no mandate whatever? How many of you heard the promise to abolish the First Time Buyers Grant being debated at election time? How many of you recall the proposal to reintroduce third level fees being debated at election time? Where in the manifesto was it promised to increase VAT on fuel, energy and housing? At which chapel gate meeting were the merits of savaging the Community Employment Scheme canvassed?

On which television programme did Charlie McCreedy announce his decision to dismantle the Freedom of Information Act? Did you miss the radio broadcast by Joe Walsh that he would be closing Teagasc centres up and down the country? Did either party tell you of their intention not to provide one single new place for people with disabilities this year? Did they say that they were going to starve the Drugs Strategy of funding?

You didn't miss any of these proposals because there were no such proposals. And now the main expenditure priority of this Government is to go shopping for, not one but two, Government jets so that our Taoiseach won't be left stranded in the rain - because his mascara might run.

Well I can tell you, it will take more than a 100,000 euro spent on makeup to cover up the cracks in this Government's performance.

And what of the role of the PDs? Apparently the PDs are afraid now that if they adopt the one member one vote that we did, they might be taken over by an interest group! I always thought the PDs were an interest group!

The proposition that the PDs are in Government to contain the excesses of Fianna Fáil is a fiction. In agreeing to dismantle Freedom of Information, the PDs are providing shelter to Fianna Fáil to revert to the bad old ways of doing business. In opposition the PDs were the champions of openness and transparency.

In Government they support Charlie McCreevy, who has done for openness and transparency what Richard Hillman did for healthy living in Coronation Street.

After all that, Fianna Fáil and the PDs have the insufferable arrogance to behave as if they have no responsibility for the reckless decisions of the previous Ahern Government. They have the brass neck to tell us that this year's cuts are somehow inevitable, due to an act of God, outside our control, caused by something called "the international downturn". *Nothing could be further from the truth.*

In the run-up to the last General Election Fianna Fáil and the fiscally retentive PDs squandered tens of millions of your money to buy votes. Having bought the election they then slashed public spending without any regard to the hardship caused or to the damage done.

Within two weeks of returning to office, what was the first Fianna Fáil cutback? The first thing they cut was aid to the poor of the developing world. Meanwhile, special tax breaks are designed for Private investors in Private Hospitals. Residency laws facilitate tax exiles returning here when they choose. 16,000 sites are handed back to developers rather than enforce the social housing provisions. The new social partnership agreement excludes most of the community sector with a warning from our nice Taoiseach that when you're on the outside you'll stay on the outside. And Cheltenham Charlie refuses to tax his friends who own the bloodstock industry.

In any other country in Europe citizens who disagree with that self-serving agenda would vote Labour. Yet in Ireland many such people voted for Fianna Fáil, partly because of history and partly because they believed the empty rhetoric.

However the stresses and strains of a more wealthy and unequal Ireland have pulled Ahern's Fianna Fail over to the side of wealth and property and privilege.

Indeed like the Normans of old, it could be said of Fianna Fail that they have now become more PD than the PDs themselves. Tax breaks for the rich; cuts in public spending; the sale of state assets: these are as much beloved in new Fianna Fail as they are the staple diet of their partners.

New Fianna Fail cannot any longer take for granted people who work for a living. And it is our great challenge to persuade these people, "*If you think Labour, vote Labour*".

This Government has in the last months betrayed its traditional supporters in another way. It has cast aside our neutrality, a core value that for generations has defined Irish people's vision of themselves as an independent, sovereign people in the world. From the early stage development of national identity through the struggle for independence to the achievement of statehood, neutrality has been a defining vision of Irish people for Ireland in the world.

I am proud of the role our party played in voicing the opposition of the Irish people to the pre-emptive war in Iraq, and in asserting the vital need for the voice of the United Nations not to be stilled. The manner of the Anglo-American victory has undermined even further the case set out for war. As yet, not one warhead has been found; no chemical or biological weapons; no nuclear bombs; no long-range missiles.

It looks like that we can now conclude what we always believed - Saddam Hussein was a tyrant, but he was not a threat to the outside world and the invasion was illegal. That was why, throughout the conflict, we tried to be a voice for peace and the rule of international law, and no voice was heard more clearly than that of our new Party President *Michael D. Higgins*.

Our target is the next General election. I don't know when that will be but I can't see this arrogant deceitful Government rushing to meet its fate. So we are in a marathon, not a 100-metre dash. We must use the time to construct a credible alternative.

That alternative, the purpose of our social democratic project, must be **The Fair Society**. The key for us is that our choices will make a fundamental difference to the lives of people – not to a set of interest groups, but to real people.

The Fair Society means a society based on social justice, sustainable development and personal freedom. The Fair Society is about the expansion of the real freedoms that people enjoy: freedoms flowing from access to a full education, that derive from access to a comprehensive quality health service; that obtain with the defeat of poverty,

that are secured through the restoration to esteem of the public realm – public open spaces, public broadcasting, public art and science, public transport and so on.

It is also a society that fully recognises the importance of efficiency and enterprise as a condition of economic and social development. The Fair Society is supported by a dynamic economy where entrepreneurship and innovation is carefully nurtured.

The Fair Society demands an end to poverty and racial intolerance. Alongside the new affluence of the Celtic Tiger remains the grim reality of poverty for thousands of families, especially in large pockets in our cities. The Fair Society would focus resources on these areas, make them a real priority for investment, and reverse this Government's dismantling of local initiatives – such as the RAPID Programme.

The Fair Society must be governed openly and honestly, by a Government which does not behave like a latter-day absentee landlord. Accountable government is about more than constant photo opportunities and pub openings, stopping only long enough to pose for the camera but never long enough to understand the peoples' real concerns. There is no place in the Fair Society for the culture of secrecy and unaccountability Fianna Fáil and the PDs want to re-introduce. *That is why Labour in Government will ensure that the right to Freedom of Information, now so shamefully dismantled, will be restored.*

The Fair Society can never be a place where people are ashamed of politics. For a decade or more public enquiries have cast a shadow over public life. Whether beef barons or bankers facilitated tax evasion; whether the lives of women and haemophiliacs were put at risk by the negligence of state agencies; whether the shape of Dublin County is the result of a conspiracy between some developers, some politicians, some officials – *these are questions that can't be swept aside.*

But let me say this, to people contemplating joining a political party. No former Minister of ours stands accused of abusing elective office or setting up a party political radio station, and no local authority member in our ranks ever put his or her vote up for auction.

The Fair Society is a place where people are safe on their streets and safe in their homes. The Fair Society is a place where parents aren't left to fight the drugs menace from their own resources. In the Fair Society there should be no tolerance for the targeting and exploitation of young people by companies that manufacture certain alcoholic products, deadly poisonous in their impact, but designed specifically to be marketed almost as harmless fun for teenagers.

The Fair Society will require us to confront some hard questions on drugs, crime and policing. A climate of fear is nothing new to the residents of large housing estates in our cities, or indeed of far too many areas in rural Ireland. They know only too well what it means to be under-policed. And yes – we do need more Gardaí – *especially* community Gardaí.

But we need them to be well managed, efficiently deployed, and properly accountable. There is only one police force in this country, and in general it has a proud record of service to the community. But the time has come, in the interests of the whole community including the Garda itself, for a new Garda Authority, a fully independent Garda ombudsman and structures to ensure that the Gardaí are fully responsive to local communities. We all supported Patton in Northern Ireland. *It's time we had Patton down here now.*

The Fair Society regards the taxation system as a vehicle for building the world-class health care, housing, transport and public services our people are entitled to in return for a fair and equitable contribution through tax. Unlike the PDs, the Labour Party does not see fair taxation as confiscation of private wealth. In the Fair Society it is time to get real about closing off the tax loopholes and to put a stop to the creation of new secretive tax breaks.

It is time that investors paid tax at the same rate as people who work, not half the rate as at present. Nor can The Fair Society tolerate tax exempt status for those favoured citizens who leave their calling card in the Fianna Fáil tent at the Galway Races.

It is time for a Government that has sufficient confidence in the Irish economy to invest in public services and infrastructure. That may well mean prudent and careful borrowing to build the major capital projects that underpin our future, and I say that would not merely be wise and provident, but a necessary thing to do. High quality public services and world class infrastructure aren't just at the heart of The Fair Society – *they sustain and drive it too.*

Next month, all of us here tonight will join in celebrating the courage and grace of athletes who have surmounted huge barriers to participate in the Special Olympics. The Fair Society would make the investment in new services and places to ensure that scaling these barriers is made easier. In the name of the Fair Society Labour is committed to a Disability Bill containing real enforceable rights, and I promise you now that we will fight this Government *every step of the way* if it tries to get away with less.

At the core of the Fair Society is education. The Fair Society is a place where every child, irrespective of income, can find knowledge to reach the limit of their

potential. A system that re-erects barriers to participation in third level education has no place in The Fair Society. Life-long learning is not a new concept for the Labour movement, we have been committed to it for more than a century. We are proud to have made third level education free, and if we have to, *we will do it again*, as one of the first priorities in Government.

I believe that there is a majority out there for a strong and dynamic economy, high quality public services and an equitable welfare state. In other words I repeat my conviction that a majority of the electorate *think* Labour but don't *vote* Labour.

We haven't always made it easy for them. We haven't always acknowledged the change that has happened in Ireland over 30 years. We haven't even acknowledged to ourselves the seminal role that Labour has played in that period of exceptional change. The policies, campaigns and decisions of Labour in Government and outside of Government have significantly shaped the modern Ireland. As a result the electorate itself has changed.

For example as a result of wider participation in education, there are now hundreds of thousands of people who enjoy, or aspire to, middle class lifestyles. This doesn't mean that they are lost to the Labour Party unless we act and talk as if they were.

We have to adapt to the new Ireland that we ourselves helped to create. That means, for example, accepting that modern citizens as taxpayers are often more conscious of themselves as consumers and customers than they are preoccupied with the ownership structures of any given enterprise.

For instance, most people are more interested in an affordable quality health insurance system that doesn't cherry pick or discriminate against old or vulnerable people than they are with whether the providers are public or private.

But different considerations apply in each case. The same people, confronted with outrageously inaccessible private insurance cover for young drivers or small companies, would have no difficulty with public intervention in the marketplace irrespective of Mary Harney's six years of hiding behind European competition rules.

Labour is proud of our organic connection to the wider Labour Movement. In The Fair Society Labour will continue to push the trade union agenda for better conditions for Irish workers, for an improved health and safety environment, for better illness and redundancy protection, for enhanced participation at enterprise level.

At the same time the trade union leadership will be the first to appreciate that the Labour Party cannot make transport policy only for transport workers, although their input is vital. We cannot make education policy only for teachers, though their input is essential. We can't make health policy for doctors, although to exclude their contribution would be unthinkable.

In the health service of The Fair Society the needs of patients come first. This Government is denying thousands of patients access to essential health care. A health service that puts patients first cannot be built on the cheap. But money is not enough. The money should follow the patient, so that hospitals are rewarded for treating them, not penalised. That's the kind of structural reform that's required to deliver less bureaucracy, better management, value for money and excellence.

Ours is a Party dedicated to the proposition that we are all born equal. We live now in an unequal society, a society that sustains and reproduces inequality of opportunity and discrimination in too many areas of life.

At the same time we are fortunate to live in a country of great possibility. The capacity, creativity and innovation of our people has generated in the last decade more prosperity than the previous generations could ever imagine. There is less excuse therefore for the growing disparities of wealth that we see, less excuse for our failure to tackle some of the glaring inequalities we face.

I believe that we, the people of Ireland, have the capacity, the ingenuity and now the maturity to make the right choices.

The people can determine when this incompetent jaded Government gets its comeuppance.

The people can choose policies and values for the future of their children.

The people can build the Fair Society.

It is our task, as our slogan says, to put the people in power. The success of our final course will rest in your hands.

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