



‘Building an Equal Society’

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Leader of the Labour Party

Parliamentary Labour Party Away Day
Nano Nagle Centre, Cork
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Colleagues, comrades,

We believe in the fundamental equality of every person, and the right of every person to a decent standard of living.

I believe that a great many people share this belief and want to see a much fairer society.

While we have made great strides in terms of marriage equality and women’s equality – although there is still some way to go – we have not dealt with the greatest inequality in Ireland, which is economic inequality.



Too many people are on low wages, and no matter how hard they work, they cannot overcome exorbitant rents, excessive childcare costs and constant other demands on their income.

The Labour Party exists to reduce inequality, injustice and disadvantage, and to build an equal society in Ireland.

Throughout our long history, this is the fundamental reason why we are in politics.



It is why we have defended workers’ rights and helped create good quality jobs.

It is why we have fought corruption and implemented transparency laws.

And it is why we have fought for equality for women and for minority rights, and fought against discrimination and racism.



The Nano Nagle Centre is a suitable location for reflecting on the theme of this year's away day: 'Building an Equal Society'.

Honorina Nagle dedicated her life to serving the people of Cork by building schools and supports for people in poverty. And the Presentation Order she founded continues her work in education and social inclusion.

Later today, we will have contributions from speakers who work daily to reduce poverty, inequality and discrimination, and we will discuss their ideas for how these problems can be solved.

Tomorrow we will have sessions to discuss the next general election.

And of course, we cannot escape discussion of Brexit.

There is a real and present danger that Brexit will not only harm our economy and the UK's, but it will also increase inequality in both jurisdictions.



Economic inequality is Ireland's great weakness.

We need a change of direction on economic policy.

Our challenge is to convince people that the economy could be and should be much better than it is.

The benefits of the economy should be shared more fairly, for low paid workers and for those parts of the country that have been left behind.

And the economy should be more sustainable, in every sense, including climate change.



Our economy is once again the fastest growing in Europe, but nearly a quarter of all workers are still in low paid jobs.

Our public debt is falling, but Fine Gael is badly mismanaging the public finances.

Unemployment has fallen, but with many people only able to find part-time or precarious work, we are far from achieving real full employment.

Unemployment is over 6% in many parts of the country, and over 8% in the South-East.



Labour has always argued that good jobs are the cornerstone of an equal society.

And that good jobs are the best way out of poverty.

This is still true.

Everything we did to rebuild the economy was to support job creation for ordinary working people. Labour raised the minimum wage, after Fianna Fáil and the Greens cut it.

In the era of zero-hour contracts and precarious work, we have brought forward new laws to block loopholes and to strengthen the rights and protections of workers.



But not all jobs in our economy are good jobs.

Full-time work no longer guarantees a person a decent standard of living.

Fewer young people are securing permanent jobs – despite having more education and qualifications than any previous generation.

And there is a persistent gap between the pay of women and men, made worse by the lack of affordable quality childcare.



The lack of good jobs across the country is one of the main causes of inequality.

One in four of our children is brought up at risk of poverty.

Child poverty is much lower in the Netherlands, Finland or Sweden.

It is also lower in Australia, Canada or New Zealand.

We can do much better to give our children and young people a fairer start in life.

This is why Labour is proud to support the NoChild 2020 campaign by the Children’s Rights Alliance.

This campaign seek to realise the ambition of Labour leader Tom Johnson’s words in the Democratic Programme of the first Dáil:

“It shall be the first duty of the Government of the Republic to make provision for the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of the children, to secure that no child shall suffer hunger or cold from lack of food, clothing, or shelter, but that all shall be provided with the means and facilities requisite for their proper education”

It is long past time that we eliminated child poverty in our country.



But under Leo Varadkar, propped up in government by Micheál Martin, we have seen a litany of failures: in housing, in health care and on climate change.

And we have seen inaction on the issues of poverty and income inequality.

We have record levels of homelessness, including 3,778 children who are spending their formative years in homeless accommodation right now, as have many other children who passed through homelessness in recent years.

Housing costs are keeping many workers in poverty.

One in every five households on low incomes pay more than 40% of their income on housing costs, as do one in four low income individuals in their twenties.

The result is that many people – working in areas like retail, hospitality or security – are simply unable to afford a home.

This has led to overcrowding in shared housing, and long commutes to work.

Even couples working full-time with good jobs cannot afford home ownership in many parts of the country.



Our health system is deeply unfair.

Lower paid workers often don't have Medical Cards but can't afford health insurance either, so for them healthcare is expensive or inaccessible.

Hospital over-crowding and long waiting lists are undermining public confidence in the health system. The number of people on trolleys will exceed 10,000 in the coming weeks.



Under Fine Gael, we are failing to meet our climate targets.

Climate change also involves inequality.

For too long, businesses have not paid the full price for their greenhouse gas emissions.

Most young people are deeply concerned that they are inheriting a world that is polluted, over-heating and rapidly losing biodiversity.

It isn't fair for younger generations to carry the cost of fixing our economy.

We all must all share the challenge of making our way of life sustainable.



When Labour was in government, deprivation fell by a third and income inequality fell.

Unemployment fell dramatically after we stabilised the economy.

And Labour introduced Ireland's first Climate Action law, after Fianna Fáil prevented the Green Party from introducing one in the previous government.

But it isn't enough.

Our economy is still unfair, and we need to do much more to ensure that everyone can have a decent and sustainable standard of living.

And we need to correct mistakes that were made.



One thing we can say about the current Fine Gael government is that people can see clearly that they are relaxed about austerity and inequality.

They dismantled the safeguards that we created to protect the public's money.

They have made a series of hugely expensive errors: on the children's hospital, on metro and on rural broadband.

Despite this, they are promising tax cuts to the top earners.

And while spending millions on advertising and self-promotion, they haven't initiated any major reforms to reduce poverty.



On Brexit, Labour warned Fine Gael repeatedly to seek closure on the Irish part of the deal, but we were assured by the Taoiseach that the withdrawal agreement was "cast iron" and "bullet-proof".

Now, with just over 50 days to go, Brexit is chaotic and out of our control.

A hard, no-deal Brexit is more likely than ever, and ordinary workers will be the ones to pay the price of a sudden rupture in trade with Britain.

We still don't know how much money will be made available by the government to protect jobs.

A no-deal Brexit will be much more sudden than the 2008 crash. The effect on jobs will be immediate and catastrophic.

We need clarity on the government's latest estimates for job losses. They have already indicated that 10,000 jobs could be lost in tourism alone.

Labour has been clear. We need a fund to support jobs through the difficult adjustment period following a hard Brexit, to give viable businesses a fair chance to survive.

Fine Gael's response to date has been far too passive.



The last three years has also made it clear – if it wasn't clear enough already – that there is no real difference between the economic policies of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil.

Surely, the public deserves something better than to be offered the choice between a Fine Gael government propped up by Fianna Fáil or a Fianna Fáil government propped up by Fine Gael.



There is an alternative in Irish politics.

Labour will lay out our alternative budget and economic strategy in October, which will demonstrate that we can afford real change.

Now is not the time for tax cuts, and Paschal Donohoe should rule them out in any Brexit scenario and instead pledge the necessary investment for frontline services.



Labour will stand at the by-elections and next general election on our own platform, without any voting pacts.

But I will ask Labour voters to continue their preferences for those progressive parties and independents that agree with our programme.



Labour's view on government formation has not changed.

We will not support any government – including from opposition – unless they deliver on five specific priorities.



Let us be clear on what we want to achieve.

To build an equal society, Labour wants the following:

Genuine full employment, where all jobs pay a Living Wage; which we would achieve by requiring employers to bargain collectively with trade unions as is normal across Europe, as well as by raising the national minimum wage.

Radical change to housing policy, focused on people's right to a home. We would make homes affordable whether people want to rent or buy. We would create a €16 billion fund to build 80,000 homes, and we would regulate the private rental sector while ensuring developers are focused on building homes that are affordable for ordinary workers.

To **eliminate fuel poverty and achieve a just transition to a low carbon economy**, we want a major State-led programme of home retrofitting and investment to create new, sustainable jobs. We envisage street-by-street programmes of work on council housing, to which home owners can opt in. We want climate policy to be led by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, with funds made available to support workers and communities most vulnerable to the transition.

We want to **end health inequality and to build a high quality public health system** that serves everyone. Having brought in free GP care for the under-6s, we want free GP care for all under-18s next. To fix overcrowding and waiting times in hospitals, we want further investment in primary care centres, which can divert less urgent cases from the hospitals, with a special focus on expanding child and adult mental health services.

And we want **every child to have a fair start in life**, free from discrimination, with genuinely free-of-charge education starting at primary level. We want the provision of hot school meals to help end the situation where any child in this country goes hungry or malnourished. And we would run a pilot programme of public pre-school education in the most disadvantaged areas, to ensure a generation of children is not left behind and to allow their parents to seek work, education or training.



We have a positive, forward-looking vision for our country.

It is well within our resources to achieve a much more equal society.

Labour will campaign for our platform based on our track record for careful management of public money, and for our ability to reduce inequalities in a way that is fair and sustainable.

Our aim is to bring people together, to work on the achievement of this vision.

Our job, this weekend, and every day until the next election, is to build support for our vision of an equal society, and to build support to achieve it in every constituency in Ireland.