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1. Introduction

Ireland's rural population is becoming more diverse in terms of economic interests and expectations. This is reflected particularly in communities experiencing reverse migration, as people leave our badly managed cities for a better quality of life in the country.

However, in spite of change, the following underlying groups still experience problems of poverty and rural isolation:

- Marginal farmers who depend on off-farm income and/or domestic State transfers such as social welfare.

- Low income families, women and older people who suffer inequality of opportunity because of a lack of access to basic services and opportunities.

Although agriculture will remain a vital sector within our economy for the foreseeable future, agriculture on its own will not provide the income and employment opportunities required to sustain prosperity in rural communities. The Labour Party believes that a new approach is required to respond to the needs of a changing rural society. It is time to shift the balance away from the Common Agricultural Policy to a much broader rural policy, which benefits all of those living in rural areas.

The object of our policy proposals is to address the general lack of economic opportunities, restricted mobility and hidden poverty in rural areas. In turn, we believe that we can create a more vibrant rural society.

Our platform for a rural policy is underpinned by the following:

**Changing the focus of agriculture**

The Labour Party is strongly of the view that the focus on agriculture production should move from being production-driven to being market-led. This would entail a complete reform of the way in which agriculture production is supported, and significant changes in the way in which we manage food safety.

**Institutional Reform**

Re-balancing rural policy away from just CAP to a broader framework for overall rural development will require institutional reform. Such reform would spread across the current Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, as well as key agencies such as Teagasc and the Rural Partnerships. It would also require the removal of overall responsibility for food from the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development to a different Government Department.

**Supporting Rural Communities**
A much greater focus on rural policy is needed at Government level to ensure rural regeneration and sustainability. New investment in infrastructure, services and balanced regional development is vital in this context. To this end, Labour’s proposal to establish a new Department of Infrastructure will provide a basis for a fairer deal for rural communities in spreading the benefits of economic growth across Ireland. A strategy to address social exclusion and inequality must also be central to rural policy development.

2. Changing the focus of agriculture

The foot and mouth crisis and the ongoing BSE problem has highlighted the huge importance of agriculture to the Irish economy. Indeed, the cost of disease to Irish farming really hit-home with the closure of many of our important world markets through BSE and foot and mouth.

As a result of the lessons learned from these experiences, a debate has arisen about what direction Irish agriculture should take in the future.

The consumer is becoming more concerned about food quality and it seems that their demand for safety and traceability are now on a par with other agricultural policy objectives. During the foot and mouth crisis, in particular, it became evident that the farming community also recognised the importance of maintaining food quality and assuring the consumer that Irish food products could be traced back to the producer.

With this in mind, the Labour Party proposes to re-examine the direction of Irish agriculture. We recognise that Ireland has a reputation as a quality food producer and we have an ability to produce high quality food at a relatively low cost. We propose to build and enhance our reputation as a quality food producer, both at an EU and international level.

Our proposals for agriculture are underpinned by the following:

- The creation of a consumer driven agricultural industry.
- A restructured farm support system which rewards farmers on the basis of production which is safe and of a high quality.
- Farming methods which protect and show respect for the environment, including the setting of ambitious targets and incentives for organic production.

The Labour Party is keenly aware of the tremendous work done by farming sector, industry, public authorities, semi-states and third level bodies in building up our enviable reputation as a good source of food.

However, there is now a need to re-examine our regulatory and supportive arrangements to respond to consumer demands. The food industry must be market-led and not production-driven.

Production-driven thinking has diverted attention from the need to respond to market
Lack of proper supervision and control of our food industry, has contributed to this failure to respond adequately to market demand. Monitoring our food produce from production to consumption should be a seamless operation, with responsibility for food safety and quality based within one agency.

The Labour Party strongly advocates an All-Ireland approach to food policy and is committed to working towards this objective in Government.

**Disease and fraud control**

Revelations which came to light in 2001 that a small minority of farmers claimed subsidies for livestock that did not exist and evidence of smuggling have done serious damage to the reputation and morale of the majority of compliant farmers.

The Disease of Animals (Amendment) Act, 2001 which was passed by the Dáil during the foot and mouth crisis and the tagging system for sheep will go a long way towards ensuring integrity in primary agriculture. Labour is committed to reviewing these measures and enhancing them if necessary, while at the same time ensuring that they do not impinge upon compliant farmers, and by ensuring their application in a practical and workable fashion.

**Diversity in farm produce**

To ensure that Ireland’s agricultural economy continues to play a central role in the national economy, Labour believe that diversification in farm activity must take place on a much larger scale than at present.

To enable this, the Labour Party is committed to providing support and training to farmers who develop sustainable alternative farm enterprise, which include the following:

**Forestry**

Forestry in Ireland is underdeveloped and lacks specific targets for its future development.

The Labour Party believes that there is a need to develop forestry in a way that protects the environment and which is compatible with rural development. To this end, support for forestry development would be contingent on the following:

- Diversification in timber species, with a particular emphasis on quality Irish woods.
- Protection and respect for the environment and physical landscape in the planting of forest.
- The provision of public access and walkways through forest land.

The Labour Party would work towards a target of increasing Ireland’s productive forest to 1.5 million hectares by 2020. To ensure that this development would take place in
way which ensures the maximum outputs, while ensuring respect for the environment, investment would take place in training, research and market development.

**Organic Farming**

Consumer demand for organic produce in the EU has increased significantly in recent years. The recent food scares have prompted consumers to seek out organic produce and many are now prepared to pay extra if they know that the food they are purchasing has been produced in a safe, chemical-free environment.

However, the organic food industry in Ireland is still far too under-developed to secure a significant share of the increased market.

The Labour Party is committed to increasing the targets for organic production. To enable this to happen, Labour would:

- Increase investment in support for start-up organic producers.
- Invest in the training and start-up support for organic farmers to ensure viability.
- Extend mainstream advice and support services on organic farming in all main Teagasc centres.
- Establish a formal consultation process involving organic producers on future development in the industry.

3. **Institutional Reform**

The structure and role of the institutions which are associated with rural policy are heavily steeped in the traditional philosophy that farming is the mainstay of the community and once it survives, so too will the services around it. While it is no doubt true that agriculture still functions as the backbone of rural communities, its role is now less important.

In recognition of the way in which farming and rural communities are changing, the Labour Party is proposing reform of the following areas and functions:

**The Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development**

The Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development should become the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The role of this Department would be to:

(i) drive agriculture policy, and be responsible for ensuring good practice in respect of farming methods and claims for farm income supports;

(ii) develop and drive rural policy with regard to services, employment opportunities and access to transport.
The role of food policy and food safety should be completely removed from the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. With regard to food policy, we are proposing that responsibility be given to a different Government Department.

In our Plan to Combat BSE, the Labour Party advocated that complete responsibility for food safety should be vested in the Food Safety Authority right through from farm to fork, and not just from farm gate to fork as currently is the case. The Food Safety Authority should be empowered to carry out on-farm inspections to establish if, for instance, feed practices are compliant. The FSAI would be directly answerable to the Minister for Food.

**Independent FEOGA Agency**

The administration of EU payments by the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development has been the subject of criticism in the past because of the rigidity of procedures and, in some cases, delays in delivering payments.

It is broadly recognised that the Department’s handling of EU payments has improved in more recent years since the introduction of the Charter for Farmers' Rights and the Customer Service Action Plan. Nevertheless, there is still room for greater efficiency in this regard.

The Labour Party proposes the establishment of an Independent FEOGA payments agency which would be answerable and accountable to the Minister for Agriculture. This agency would have responsibility for implementing more efficient methods of payment administration by maximising the use of data collected under the Cattle Movement Monitoring Scheme to enable automatic payments.

In addition, the Labour Party is committed to the establishment of a properly resourced appeals unit, as set out in the Agriculture Appeals Act (2001) and advocated in the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness.

**Teagasc**

The Labour Party advocates the reorientation of the functions and structures of Teagasc to take account of the changing needs of the farming community, as well as to enable it play a greater role in rural development. To this end we would undertake a comprehensive review of Teagasc, to examine how that agency can best meet the challenges of the future.

The traditional core work of Teagasc has been to provide a mentoring and advice service to farmers. However, with the growth in part-time farming, this service is now not addressing the needs of all farmers.

The Labour Party is committed to an evaluation of the services by Teagasc, with a view to making it more accessible to the changing needs of farmers in the area of business and technological advice.
In addition, the Labour Party recognises that staff retention is a problem at Teagasc, particularly where young graduates are concerned. As with many areas in the public service, staff are opting for better opportunities in the private sector.

Labour is committed to a review of staff policy and conditions within the agency with the net objective of retaining a broad pool of skills and experience within the organisation.

Labour envisages that the key role of Teagasc would be to:

- Concentrate resources on improving Ireland's competitive advantage associated with grass-based production.
- Develop environmentally sustainable methods of farming.
- Increase its focus on small-time farmers and react more comprehensively to the phenomenon of part-time farming.
- Recruitment of suitably qualified graduates to investigate policy options which have optimum impact on competitiveness of the agri-food industry and a positive impact on the development of rural areas.

Reform of farm supports

Most of the policy instruments available in relation to food and agriculture are now EU-based. Ireland, since joining the EU, has always had a substantial input into the design of these policies. Indeed, the Irish agricultural economy has been transformed significantly as a result of EU agri-policy. Labour is committed to ensuring that employment and incomes in agriculture are protected and that the sector continues to contribute to the development of the economy. Pressure from the EU and the next round of WTO talks will be managed insofar as possible to ensure that any changes to supports or liberalisation of markets will be brought about in a gradual and phased manner.

Nonetheless, there is a need to re-examine the effectiveness of these policies in terms of sustaining the maximum number of farm families and ensuring high quality produce.

The following are key areas of reform:

(i) Access to Quotas: Quotas and poor access to land are severe restrictions for both farmers and types of farming in Ireland. The Labour Party advocates that the rules controlling the quota-land link be progressively relaxed to reduce the capital values of quotas.

(ii) Suckler Cow Restructuring: Labour will establish a properly structured suckler cow restructuring scheme. Labour opposes any further cut in the beef suckler herd.

(iii) Direct Payments: EU direct payments are now the major, and often the only source, of income for most farmers. But these payments are linked to eligible animals and land and therefore encourage volume rather than quality and further isolate
farmers from real markets.

Labour supports a policy which links the direct payments to the resources used in the farming activities and the quality of the product produced. This would encourage farmers to produce quality products for sophisticated consumer markets while using safe farming and environmental practices. For example, if part or all of the direct payment was made payable to the farmer per se, its value would transfer directly into income rather than into an asset (land and animals) and the active farmer rather than the asset holder would benefit.

In addition, we will introduce new conditions for qualification for direct payments. This would make the level of direct payments available to farmers contingent on environmental and animal welfare criteria. We believe that such new conditions would encourage the farmer to incorporate best practice into farming activities and the consumer and environment would benefit.

**REPS**

Labour believes that the Rural Environment Protection Scheme has been largely successful. It is the only mainstream policy initiative in which the rural environment is considered an asset not a cost.

Labour will refocus REPS to target the payments toward:

- environmentally sensitive areas and zones
- smaller farmers by restructuring the payment method
- positive actions and activities (reward land access and/or site restorations) by providing top-up payments for “extras”.

Labour will also reform the administration of the REPS to enhance its public image and increase the transparency of its objectives. Labour favours the separation of REPS administrative functions as follows:

- The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, in consultation with the Department of the Environment, would devise the scheme and the operating rules.
- Teagasc and private REPS planners would operate the rules but planners would be individually registered.
- The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in conjunction with the EPA would cross-check an appropriate sample of plans and farms to ensure compliance.

**4. Creating a rural policy**

Agriculture is no longer the main activity in every rural community and many farmers have part-time jobs. Much has been achieved by the Area Partnerships and County
Development Teams in this regard.

Nevertheless, combating rural decline and disadvantage remains a huge challenge for communities right across Ireland. In arresting the drift from rural Ireland, a more focused approach is required to encourage investors to locate some industries in rural villages and towns.

In other European countries the concept of "tele-cottaging", is now well established with many people working in rural areas at jobs involving the processing of information. Meanwhile, in Ireland, the conditions to enable such employment are not being created, or in some cases, are being stripped away.

The Labour Party is committed to the following:

**Maintaining Post Offices**

The rationalisation of postal services across Europe has created a serious threat to the livelihood of rural post offices. Rather than accepting post office closures as a fait accompli, the Labour Party is committed to supporting and revitalising their role and function.

Post offices should become resource centres offering a range of services needed to stimulate employment, including technical assistance through the provision of internet and e-mail facilities.

**Development of alternative farm enterprises and off-farm enterprises**

A limited but under-developed market exists for alternative farm enterprises. The Labour Party will support the development of alternative enterprises through the provision of financial (tax breaks and low interest loan), and technical support (training and advice) for both the production and marketing of these products and services. The delivery of these supports will be core to the work of Teagasc.

The Labour Party will examine tax concessions for tele-workers who operate from designated rural areas. This would encourage the establishment of self-employment and small businesses which use IT to provide services in a decentralised way in rural areas.

**Ensuring the Availability of Farm Labour**

Under-employed labour and low wage rates have always existed in Irish agriculture. However, in recent years, the supply of labour available to farming has declined while labour costs have increased.

Labour will tackle penalties in our social welfare and tax codes to mobilise existing labour resources (older farmers, low-income farmers, farmers on small holders dole). As its stands, those working in a range of seasonal industries, such as tourism and agriculture, are heavily penalised under the social welfare code, and can face
disqualification from social welfare payments if they are found not to be actively looking for work in the low season.

Developing Rural Transport

Transport is necessary for people in rural communities to combat social exclusion and isolation. Reduced mobility compounds social exclusion and denies members of the community opportunities for access to basic services, education, jobs, and social interaction.

The lack of adequate transport in rural Ireland has particularly impacted on older people who, even with a free travel pass, cannot access transport because they cannot access it from nearby their homes. Other groups who have been disadvantaged because of a lack of access to rural transport include stay-at-home parents without car who cannot avail of pre-school facilities or training/education activities and people with a disability.

The mobility needs of our rural population can no longer be filled by traditional transport. Current rural transport demonstration projects are operating in an environment where there is an absence of clear policies, funding or a regulatory framework for rural transport. The Labour Party is committed to putting in place the structures in which a public rural transport network can operate.

To enable such reform, the Labour Party is committed to reform which takes into account the current needs of the rural population. In addition, a Rural Transport Authority will be established to carry out the following functions:

- The establishment of guidelines for community transport project and social care schemes to operate without difficulty.
- Creating standardised guidelines to obtain demand responsive route licenses from the Department of Public Enterprise.
- The creation of a simple voucher system to allow local operators to obtain full reimbursement for free travel pass holders from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs.
- To carry out a review of the free travel pass benefit in the context of usage on multiple modes of transport services.
- Co-ordination on a regional level of current Bus Eireann, private operator and local community transport services in order to ensure that all public and community transport services complement each other.

National Rural Forum

Labour advocates the establishment and operation of a Rural Partnership Forum where all bodies with an interest in the rural economy would be represented. The Forum would have an adequate annual budget with a standing independent Secretariat and would produce reports and suggestions for both the Minister and the Oireachtas as a whole. The Forum would also liaise downward with: Local
Enterprise Boards, Leader Groups and Local Authorities, groups like the ICA, Muintir na Tíre and organisations representative of small farmers, to ensure that the development needs and funding requirements of these bodies are incorporated into National and EU policies.

5. Rural Women

The Labour Party is acutely aware of the important contribution which women make to the rural economy. Equally, we are aware of the many obstacles which restrict women's participation in the rural economy.

While it has been long-since accepted that women play a vital role in agriculture and the rural economy generally, there has been no formal recognition of that role or indeed little has ever been done to enhance that role.

Although an estimated 13,000 farm holders are women and on a further 50,000 farms women have an input to the farm work, they are still largely unrepresented on agri-related statutory bodies and, in general, women have little input to rural policy formation.

Lack of transport and the absence of childcare facilities in rural areas have restricted the ability of women to participate in training, education and employment.

It remains the position that much of the work carried out by women in rural areas goes unrecognised. The role of caring for elderly and incapacitated members of the community goes unnoticed and unaccounted for. This creates the conditions for greater levels of poverty among women in older age.

The Labour Party is critical of the lack of progress made by this Government in implementing the recommendations of the Report by the Advisory Committee on the Role of Women in Agriculture. As well as being committed to dealing with the recommendations of this report, the Labour Party will prioritise the following:

- Increasing the representation of rural women in decision and advisory bodies which have an impact on the rural economy.
- Ensuring that women working in the rural economy are recognised in both the tax and social welfare codes.
- Measuring the value of unpaid work by women in the rural economy, particularly where this involves caring for a relative or member of the community.
- Ensuring that the childcare needs of those living in rural areas are taken into account in national childcare policy.
- Improving local access for women’s training.

ENDS
Willie Penrose TD
Spokesperson on Agriculture
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