

reaching out

Caring for the Irish Abroad

March 2006

Introduction

As we approach the national holiday, and as Government Ministers travel to the four corners of the globe to meet Irish communities, our thoughts turn to the Irish abroad and in particular to those who were forced by economic necessity to leave Ireland and seek work. Many of our emigrants are now elderly and may now find themselves in poor health and housing.

We acknowledge the limited steps taken by a number of governments, including the current administration, in attempting to address some of the issues to assist Irish emigrants, but not enough was done. There is no excuse for this failure against the background of continued economic growth at home.

Recognising this, Fine Gael and the Labour Party are declaring that both parties are committed to the implementation of the Task Force on Policy Regarding Emigrants.

Despite the report being accepted by the present Government in August 2002, many key recommendations have still not been implemented in full. The progress that has been made since 2002 has come about largely as a result of pressure from the opposition parties and from various organisations representing the Irish abroad. The Task Force Report recommended the provision of €34 million in official government funding for emigrant services by 2005. However a year after this deadline, only €12 million has been provided for 2006, representing slightly over one third of the amount promised.

Fine Gael and the Labour Party are very conscious of the generosity of our emigrants during the lean years of the 1950s and 1960s, when they sent home the equivalent of €3.5 billion to assist those left behind. It is about time we said thank-you in a tangible form.

We are determined, given the resources now available to the State, and given the clear roadmap for action set out by the Task Force, to implement its key recommendations.

March 2006

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Executive Summary

The core aim of the policy proposals contained in this document is to provide greater assistance to Irish emigrants abroad, particularly those who now face economic and social disadvantage. We believe that we have a duty of care and responsibility toward Irish-born citizens *wherever* they reside. Our proposals seek to ensure that the recommendations of the Government's Task Force on Policy Regarding Emigrants are enacted in full. Our central goal is to address the critical issues of concern to Irish emigrants abroad. We have met with many Irish emigrant representative groups in the course of the development of this policy and the key issues which they have highlighted as being vitally important to the communities they serve, are those which we hope to address in this document.

These include:

1 Administrative Reform Proposals

- We are committed to establishing an Agency for the Irish Abroad, along the lines in the Task Force Report.
- We support emigrant representation in Seanad Eireann for Irish communities overseas.
- We will expand the President's Gift on Reaching Age 100 to *all* Irish born citizens provided they can supply a valid birth or baptismal certificate. Currently this gift is granted only to citizens resident within the Irish State.
- Radio and television linkage to events in Ireland is one issue which is highlighted again and again by Irish emigrants as being of huge importance to them. This was also recognised by the Task Force Report. To this end, we propose to expand the remit of RTE to allow it to broadcast in the UK. This would give Irish-born UK-based emigrants access to domestic programmes.

2 Funding Allocation Reform Proposals

- Funding for the provision of services to Irish-born emigrants, particularly those in disadvantaged circumstances, is a critical issue. Currently, we are failing to meet the funding targets recommended in the Task Force Report. We are committed to significantly increasing funding allocations.
- We believe that Emigrant Representative Groups working with Irish-born emigrants abroad have a right to seek funding from the Dormant Accounts Disbursement Board. There is currently, at least, €300m contained in Dormant Fund Accounts. These accounts include monies deposited by Irish-born emigrant in Irish bank accounts. Irish emigrants must also be entitled to benefit from these funds.
- The plight of Irish born female emigrants is an area which has been identified as one in which there is a need for greater information and dedicated programmes and services. We believe this section of Irish emigrants merits closer attention and improved services.

3 Proposals for Irish-Born U.S. Emigrants

- We are committed to negotiating a working visa exchange programme between Ireland and the U.S. This visa programme would be open to undocumented Irish emigrants living and working in the U.S., but would also

include reciprocal clauses to expand the opportunities for U.S. citizens to live and work in Ireland.

- A political initiative to convey to U.S. political, community and business interests the importance of the Kennedy-McCain Immigration Reform Legislation for undocumented Irish emigrants will be prioritised by Fine Gael and the Labour Party.

4 Proposals for Irish-Born Emigrants Returning to Ireland

- All Irish-born emigrant pensioners must have a right of free travel on public transport equal to pensioners resident in Ireland.
- Irish-born emigrant pensioners who return to live in Ireland must be entitled to social welfare entitlements equal to those enjoyed by Irish pensioners. Currently, returning emigrant pensioners are not treated equally in relation to the Living Alone Allowance and the Free Fuel Scheme.
- Increased supports for Irish-born citizens living overseas who wish to return either permanently or on holidays to Ireland must be available.

Fine Gael - Labour Party Joint Proposals for Irish-Born Emigrants

1 Administrative Reforms:

- **An Agency for the Irish Abroad**

A key recommendation of the Task Force was the establishment of a new structure – the Agency for the Irish Abroad – under the aegis of the Department of Foreign Affairs to coordinate the provision of services for Irish emigrants and Irish communities abroad. This is one of the specific proposals that the government has rejected. We believe that this was a key recommendation that could be implemented without incurring huge cost or creating cumbersome, bureaucratic structures. In government we will ensure that a body along the lines recommended by the Task Force is established.

- **Emigrant Representation in Seanad Eireann**

The Irish diaspora abroad deserves a political voice within Ireland. Most of the proposals in this regard have suggested a direct election to the Seanad by the Irish abroad. There is widespread cross party support for this principle, but logistical and organisational problems have made it very difficult to implement. The last Rainbow government invested considerable time and effort in trying to devise a scheme that would be fair, workable and secure, but without any success.

The All Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution in its Seventh Progress Report outlined in some detail the potential difficulties involved in giving emigrants a direct vote in an election to the Oireachtas. Having considered the matter at some length, the Committee made no recommendation other than to suggest that the Taoiseach, in nominating Senators, should include among his or her nominees a person or persons with an awareness of emigrant issues. We fully endorse this proposal.

We are committed in government to re-examining the possibility of some form of direct election to the Seanad and will consult with emigrant organisations to see if previous difficulties can be overcome.

- **Extend the President's Gift on Reaching Age 100 to all Irish-born Citizens.**

Currently all Irish citizens who reach 100 years of age receive a birthday gift awarded on behalf of the President. This gift is a cheque for €2,450 and is mailed to the recipient on their birthday. However, this gift is only granted to Irish citizens who are permanently resident within the State. This gift should be extended to all Irish-born citizens, *wherever* they reside, on reaching 100. There would be difficulties in tracking down the address or whereabouts of many of our Irish-born emigrants now living abroad and also issues in relation to the authenticity of applicants who apply. We propose that the President's gift should be open to all Irish-born citizens provided they can supply a valid birth or baptismal cert which verifies their date and place of birth.

- **Provide for the Broadcast of RTE television to Irish emigrants in the UK**

Greater linkages between Irish-born emigrants and their home country was a key recommendation of the Report of the Task Force on Policy Regarding Emigrants. The provision of Irish radio and television services to Irish emigrants plays an important role in maintaining such connections. Following a decision by a private broadcaster to no longer provide RTE television, RTE TV broadcasts are no longer available to Irish emigrants based in the UK. Currently RTE only has an all-Ireland remit to broadcast within the island of Ireland, we support the legislative expansion of this remit to include the UK. This would give Irish emigrants access to domestic programmes.

2 Funding Allocation Reforms:

- **Give Emigrant Organisations an Entitlement to Seek Funding from the Dormant Funds.**

Under the Dormant Accounts Act 2001 a dormant account is one where the account holder has effected no transactions in a 15-year period. Funds in accounts that have not been reclaimed after this period have been transferred to a Dormant Accounts Fund.

The surplus money held in this fund is being used to support projects aimed at easing poverty and social deprivation, supporting people with disabilities, or helping people who are educationally disadvantaged.

It is estimated that there is at least €300 million in dormant funds. Some of this money almost certainly includes monies deposited by Irish-born emigrants in Irish bank accounts. Presently, Irish emigrant organisations cannot apply for dormant funds. We believe that it is utterly fair and equitable that overseas emigrants groups who work with Irish-born citizens should be entitled to funding from such dormant funds. There are already three categories of representative bodies which can benefit and utilise Dormant Funds - in the areas of disability, educational and social disadvantage. We believe that emigrants should be included as a distinct group who can also benefit from dormant funds. This should be in addition to, rather than as a replacement for, the €34m in official funding recommended by the Task Force.

- **Significantly Increased Funding Allocations to Organisations involved with Assisting the Irish Abroad.**

Increased funding for emigrant organisations is particularly needed to assist Irish emigrants who are elderly, often living in dire conditions and who deserve a higher standard of care in their older years. In 2002, the Report of the Task Force on Policy Regarding Emigrants recommended that €15 million in 2003 and €34 million in 2005 would be necessary to meet the funding requirements of emigrant bodies. In reality, such organisations have received far less than this recommended amount. In fact, only €2.5 million in 2003 and €7 million in 2005 was granted to emigrant groups, with €12m promised in the current year. Many, many elderly Irish-born emigrants who need assistance cannot wait for the Government to meet these funding recommendations - they need Irish Government assistance now. We propose, in particular, the establishment of a dedicated fund for voluntary agencies who work with those who are old, alone, unwell or homeless. (60% of all homeless persons in

London are Irish). There should also be assistance for the promotion of Irish cultural, community and sporting activities overseas.

- **Fund Targeted Responses by Emigrant Representative Bodies Intended to Tackle the Problems Faced by Irish-born Emigrant Women.**

The problems faced by emigrant women have been recognised as less visible by emigrant organisations working on the ground. Many do not present for assistance in the same manner or to the same extent as men do. For this reason, it is recommended that greater research be undertaken to identify their specific needs. The outcomes and findings of such research must inform dedicated programmes targeted at Irish-born emigrant women living overseas.

3. Proposals for Irish Born Emigrants in the U.S.

- **Irish Government Must Seek to Negotiate a Special Visa Case for Irish Emigrants.**

There are estimated to be between 25,000 to 50,000 undocumented Irish living in the U.S. They are living and working in the U.S. and making a significant contribution to its economic, social and cultural life. What they want is the right to live and work in the U.S. without a constant fear of deportation. From the perspective of the Irish Government, the Minister for Foreign Affairs must seek to negotiate a working visa exchange programme between Ireland and the U.S. Such a programme would aim to regularise the status of undocumented Irish emigrants in the U.S, but would equally expand the opportunities for U.S. citizens to also live and work here. This programme would recognise the importance of the economic and historic ties between both countries and the need for increased foreign labour in Ireland. We believe that there is a precedent for such a programme, particularly as in recent years the U.S has established similar programmes with countries such as Australia and Chile.

- **Government must Prioritise the Plight of Undocumented Irish with U.S Interests at Every Opportunity.**

The Irish Government, its Departments and officials have regular contact with a range of U.S interests in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres and it must use each opportunity to convey to U.S. interests the importance of this issue and the need to find a solution to the plight of undocumented Irish emigrants. The U.S. Congress is currently considering legislation, "Secure America and Orderly Immigration Act of 2005", sponsored by Senators Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and John McCain (R-Ariz.). This bill is of huge importance to Irish citizens in the U.S. It seeks to give undocumented immigrants currently living and working in the U.S. the opportunity to gain full legal status. We are fully supportive of this legislation and urge all Irish political, community and business representatives to push for its enactment.

4. Proposals for Irish Born Emigrants Returning to Ireland

- **Allow Irish-born UK Emigrant Pensioners to have Access to Free Travel on Public Transport while in Ireland.**

We support the extension of the Free Travel Scheme in Ireland to Irish pensioners living in the UK, as a token of our recognition of the contribution made by our Irish emigrants. We believe that this can be achieved by way of a bi-lateral travel agreement between the UK and Irish Government and urge the Government to act on this issue at once. In addition to encouraging Irish-born emigrants to return to their roots, we recognise that this travel policy would have a significant positive impact for Ireland's tourism sector.

- **Provide Equal Entitlements for Returned Emigrant Pensioners**

We are committed to ending the anomaly whereby Irish-born emigrants who return to Ireland are *not* entitled to the Living Alone Allowance and/or Free Fuel Allowance on equal terms as Irish pensioners. The Living Alone Allowance is a supplementary payment for people in Ireland on social welfare pensions who are living alone. The National Fuel Scheme is a scheme that is intended to help households in Ireland who are dependant on long-term social welfare or Health Service Executive (HSE) payments and who are unable to provide for their own heating needs. Both are currently paid to pensioners in receipt of an Irish State pension. However, some Irish-born emigrants who have returned to retire in Ireland, but who have not been resident in the State for a set period of time, do not receive the allowances.

The State's laws should treat all Irish-born pensioners equally, making it incumbent that this unfair policy is changed to treat returning Irish-born emigrants similar to other Irish pensioners.

- **Support for Those Who Wish to Return, Permanently or on Holidays to Ireland**

The Task Force recommended the introduction of a 'Holiday in Ireland' scheme for elderly Irish emigrants in Britain who are unable or unwilling to return to live permanently in Ireland. Similar schemes are run in a number of other European countries. Travel companies and holiday providers should be encouraged to assist by offering reduced fares and charges, especially in the 'off season'.

Those who may have fallen on hard times, face particular difficulties in trying to find accommodation when returning to Ireland. We propose that those who would otherwise qualify for housing should be entitled to be included on local authority housing lists, with a quota of accommodation reserved for this group.