

Democratic Left: 1997 General Election Manifesto
Irish Election Manifesto Archive – Text reformatted and recapitalised, 2009

Making the Future Work: The Democratic Left Vision

Democratic Left is a socialist party, with the guiding principle that no society, however rich, can live at ease if some of its citizens are deprived of the fruits of prosperity. This is social justice: all of us are born equal, all of us deserve an equal chance. It is also common sense; all of us will benefit when each of us is able to make a contribution. The poverty trap of inadequate education, long term unemployment, and welfare dependence is a bitter inheritance passed from generation to generation in tens of thousands of families. This is a cruel injustice to the victims, and a shameful waste of human resources that can be put to use.

Now, when the economy is doing so well, is the time to decisively. Democratic Left's short term objective is to relieve the symptoms of poverty, with further improvements in social welfare provision for families individuals without resources. However, the next government must put in place all necessary policies - for education, training and job provision - that will eliminate for good the cycle of deprivation and exclusion. In finalising the next government's programme with our partners, we will insist on a full commitment to achieving this within ten years.

Making the future work: poverty amidst plenty

Ireland's economic performance under the rainbow coalition is an outstanding success : we've got the fastest economic growth among the world's 26 richest countries. Unemployment is falling at last, with over 1,000 people finding jobs in Ireland each week. This fantastic performance is something to be proud of - and yet it cannot conceal Ireland's deep-seated problems of child poverty, exclusion and long term unemployment for many thousands of people.

Four years ago, Ireland had one of the highest levels of poverty in the European Union. Since then large increases in child benefit, introduced by Prionsias de Rossa have improved support for low income families. The development of a national anti-poverty strategy has begun to tackle this problem. But much more needs to be done. Even the relatively well off among us experience growing frustration at the level of environmental degradation, and the failure of public services like education and health care to keep pace with economic progress. Democratic Left wants to put the ordinary decencies of human life at the centre of policy making: - we want people to flourish along with the gross national product.

We've only just begun...

Democratic Left has already made significant difference in government, from bringing forward greatly improved child benefit, paying equality arrears to 70,000 married women and focusing extra education spending on schools in deprived areas, to ending the water tax and moving vigorously against organised crime. In particular, this is the first government to seriously address the drugs issue, a campaign piloted by Democratic Left.

We kept our promises within the limits of prudent state spending, and a partnership approach on the economy, Democratic Left reinforced the human dimension of the rainbow government's programme.

But we've only just begun. A full 5-year term to implement a common platform with Fine Gael and labour will make a real impact on poverty, being to the tax-system, and apply some of the benefits

of economic growth to improving everyone's quality of life. Given another strong voice in the Dáil, and in government, Democratic Left will be a guarantor that the social policy priorities are addressed urgently, and will prevent any selfish dissipation of Ireland's unique economic opportunity. In this election, Democratic Left is proposing practical policies will government's in crucial areas. Our social lists of demands set ambitious policy objectives that can be achieved within 5 years - a full term of office. And just as we have done so far, we will keep our promises.

Jobs

Despite recent unprecedented progress on job creation, unemployment is still much too high. We are currently creating 1,000 jobs each week, and have the policies to continue doing so. The specific measures set out in Democratic Left's "passport to work" programme include:

A guaranteed offer of a job, training or education for every person who is long term unemployed. Better co-ordination of existing services. Maintenance of a high level of investment in economic development. Identification and direction of investment to industrial growth sectors in the future.

Fair taxes

There are still serious inequities in the Irish tax system. People on low incomes still pay too much tax. So do middle income earners. Yet many tax breaks are available to the very rich who can afford to put money into various investment schemes. The fruits of a prospering economy should include improved public services and lower taxes fairly distributed. Tax reduction will be focused mainly on low incomes and middle earners. But, all taxpayers will benefit.

Nobody will pay tax on the first £100 pw of income. (£200 pw. For couples). Tax loopholes for the wealthy will be closed.

There will be no tolerance for big tax evaders and jail sentences for evasion. Reduction in the rate of corporation tax must be accompanied by anti-avoidance and claw back measures to ensure that the overall tax contribution of the corporate sector is kept at a fair level.

Incomes

Our tax and welfare systems must work together to guarantee financial security and fairness. The national anti-poverty strategy initiated by Democratic Left in this government has begun the war in poverty. Democratic Left in government will insist that there is no let up in its implementation. Our main policy objectives are:

- A minimum wage for those at work.
- An adequate minimum income for all citizens.
- No tax on the first £100 pw of income.
- Further harmonisation of the tax and welfare systems to make them more work-friendly.
- Improvement in both state and occupational pensions.
- Phasing out the health and employment levies (currently 2.25%).

Crime

Tackling crime and its causes must continue as a top priority. There must be no let-up in the pursuit and conviction of criminals. Equally, government must tackle the root causes of crime. In government we would seek:

- further modernisation and more accountability in the police service at local level.
- Introduction of statutory Garda liaison committees in every local authority area.* Improved court efficiency to speed up the administration of justice.
- Completion of the prison building programme.
- Investment in keeping first offenders out of prison.
- Tackling violence against women through provision of more refuges and an anti-violence educational programme in school and prisons.

Drugs

Democratic Left has led the most sustained attack on drugs ever, this year securing £34 million, plus the seized assets on the drug barons to support communities with treatment, educational, rehabilitation and preventive measures. The establishment of local drugs task forces involving representatives on the community and voluntary sectors has transformed this struggle. We will continue to work effectively to drive drugs out of our community. Our policy priorities will involve :

- Clamping down on the smugglers and organisers of the drug trade.
- Seizing the assets of drug barons through the criminal assets bureau.
- Helping addicts as we would the victims of any serious health epidemic.
- Provision of sports and leisure facilities to turn young people away from drugs.
- Concentration on education, public information and harm reduction strategies.

The information society

Information technology is creating new wealth, new growth, new jobs and new opportunities. In Ireland we are creating a thousand new jobs every week. Leaving it all simply to market forces - the right-wing approach - will result in impoverishment for many. The information society - the European social market approach of this government - is the political alternative to the opposition's politics of selfishness and greed. We support :

- a major project for Irish schools to promote familiarisation with the development of information technology.
- A computer for every 10 children in primary school.
- All schools and libraries to be connected free to the internet.

The food industry

Democratic Left believes that the state has a responsibility to ensure that the food industry in all its component parts delivers to the consumer safe nutritious and quality food. This would be done by the creation of a statutory quality assurance scheme. Registration with the scheme would be a pre-condition to production, distribution or sale of food products for human consumption. This is what is meant by an integrated "stable to table" policy.

The cornerstone of such a scheme would be ISO standard quality surveillance underpinned by independent certification including, where appropriate, veterinary certification. This would guarantee the confidence of both domestic and overseas consumers in standards of Irish food production. Our policy therefore would be :

- To transfer responsibility for the food industry to the department of enterprise and employment, but with an independent veterinary and food inspectorate.
- The creation of a national quality assurance scheme with a legislative and mandatory basis for its key provisions and additional voluntary codes of practice.
- Computerisation of the national herd.
- The establishment of a national disease surveillance centre for zoonoses and food born diseases.

Caring for all

Our society will be judged by how well we treat those who need our care and support. Democratic Left will focus on children, the elderly, families with low incomes and people with disabilities. We have shown the priority we attach to child care with unprecedented increases in child benefit and would continue Prionsias de Rossa's reforms benefiting mothers and children. A caring society should eliminate any anxiety about being cared for in old age or in childhood.

Similarly there should be a guarantee of adequate levels of care for people with a mental or physical disability. Therefore we propose :

- the introduction of a quality assurance scheme in the health service, including the BTSB.
- A doubling of the income thresholds at which old age pensioners qualify for a medical card and the same for children under seven.
- Improved tax and welfare treatment for pensioners and carers.
- Guaranteed residential day or respite services for those with a mental or physical disability.
- The introduction of a carer's benefit, based on PRSI contributions.
- Child benefit to be doubled over the next five years.
- Department of social welfare to have responsibility for development of a child care programme and for co-ordinating the work of other departments.
-

Education

No one should be illiterate in the information age. Each school should contract with parents to guarantee functional literacy and numeracy standards on leaving primary school, and should be resourced to meet this commitment. Our proposals include:

- comprehensive pre-school provision with an initial "early start" pre-school project for every primary school designated disadvantaged.
- Phased introduction of grant assistance to PLC students.
- Equality of access to continuing education throughout adult life.
- The adult literacy & community education budget to be doubled.
- Classroom assistants for children with disabilities.
- Doubling the capitation grant to primary schools over five years.

The environment

Safe food, clean water, fresh air and clean streets! The next government must carry out an assessment of transport, farming, waste, energy and industry to ensure that all economic activity enhances rather than harms the environment. This is a matter of improving the quality of citizen's lives as well as handing an undamaged planet to future generations. We want to see the application of ecological principles to all economic activity. Our proposals include :

- Innovation and investment in public transport, including access for people with disabilities.
- Proper enforcement of traffic rules and re-assessment of parking policies.
- Revised planning procedures to protect the public interest in balanced development.
- Continuation of efforts to close down Sellafield and end the nuclear threat.

Housing

Housing is an essential human requirement. It frames our lives and shapes our communities for good or ill. Our aim is to ensure good quality, sustainable housing by maintaining social housing at its current level of 7,000 housing starts each year. Overall, the record level of house-building in Ireland far exceeds that of any other European country. The ESRI estimates that 31,000 houses are needed for the period 1996-2001. Projected figures indicate we will build 35,000 in 1997.

Greater emphasis must be put on sustainability - building within cities and towns, reviewing derelict areas and higher densities where required. Simple rezoning outwards from Dublin is not an acceptable solution.

We would reduce the cost of housing by expanding the social & co-operative housing programme, more high density development close to public transport routes and a national settlement strategy to reduce pressure on the Dublin area.

An appropriate range of measures to encourage and assist those on local waiting lists to secure their own accommodation including :

- Improving affordability under the shared ownership scheme.
- A system of "low start" mortgages involving an interest rate subsidy. This could be an alternative to, or replace, the mortgage allowance scheme.
- SWA rent supplementation to enable persons in low paid employment to obtain accommodation in the private rented sector.
- A targeted home improvement grant scheme limited to essential works replacement and insulation.
- A white paper on housing policy in the 21st century.
- Strict monitoring of lending agencies to ensure proper lending practices.
- A new programme to be completed within 10 years to ensure that all local authority houses, that need it, are provided with central heating, window replacement and insulation.
- The extension of tenant participation in good estate management as widely as possible.
- A 56% tax on windfall profits from land re-zoning.

Planning

There should be a national land use plan which would provide a framework for balanced planning. Regional authorities would draw up their guidelines in compliance with the national plan. The preparation of county development plans to be reformed in order to ensure:

- Greater accountability,
- Improved public access to information
- Integration of local strategic area plans.

Young People: Tomorrow Matters

One of the marks of social progress is how each generation creates a platform for the advancement of the next. We want young people to know that their welfare is important and that their needs will be addressed. Throughout this manifesto is a series of specific commitments intended to ensure that young Irish people grow and prosper in a society which is safe, caring and fair. In addition we propose :

- increasing places to youth reach programme.
- Increasing social welfare payments for young people living at home.
- Tax incentives to support the building of a 50 metre pool in Dublin and the building of a national sports centre.

Peace and responsibility

We want an Ireland at peace with itself and the rest of the world with a sense of responsibility towards people less fortunate and prosperous than ourselves. A greater contribution is needed towards development aid for others. We want to see:

- continued pressure for the development of "social Europe".
- Disarmament and the peaceful resolution of international conflict under united nations mandates.
- Continued increase in allocation of resources to development aid.
- Speedy resolution of our own long-running conflict in northern Ireland by insisting on an end to violence; promotion of the development of inclusive, democratic policies and a negotiated agreement based on consent.
- Continued non-membership of NATO and PFP.

Make the future work

These are intelligent, common sense policies. They are radical, because they are designed to end, not just ease, our problems of persistent poverty, environmental degradation, inequality and injustice. Democratic Left offers practical steps towards a society in which problems are not bought off at great expense, but solved, to the benefit of all.