

Action Programme for the Millennium

Foreword

The detailed basis for the policies to be implemented by the new Government are contained in the manifestos published by Fianna Fáil (People Before Politics) and the Progressive Democrats (A New Deal) and in the joint statements issued during Election '97.

This Action Programme for the New Millennium outlines some of the main objectives of the new Government over key areas of public life for the next five years. These are the points of principle and some of the priorities that Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats have agreed will guide our administration.

Incorporated in these policies is the commitment to fulfil the engagements entered into with the social partners in Partnership 2000, which runs until 1999, with a view to maximising the benefits of economic growth and social solidarity.

Bertie Ahern - Leader of the Fianna Fáil Party
Mary Harney - Leader of the Progressive Democrats

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats will work in partnership together and with others to create a peace and prosperity on this island, going into the 21st century, that the Irish people have never before experienced.

The policies of the new Government will aim to cultivate in Irish society abundant opportunities for employment and a strong spirit of enterprise, which will enable both individuals and communities, at every level, to develop to the full their natural abilities and talents.

The Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will also seek to establish an inclusive society where everyone will have the opportunity and the incentive to participate in the workforce, to contribute to the wealth of the nation and to share in the benefits of economic growth, whether or not they are engaged full-time in bringing up a family or caring for relations.

The Fianna Fáil / Progressive Democrat Government will ensure that the fruits of economic prosperity are prudently availed of to foster a truly caring society, where the needs of our elderly citizens, people with disabilities, the unemployed, our children and all in our society who are vulnerable are paramount.

We wish to see Ireland fulfil its destiny, as a modern European nation and member of the EU, with close ties to Britain, America, Australia and Canada in particular. The establishment of a lasting and equitable peace in Ireland and the successful transition to European Economic and Monetary Union will be the key challenges that the new Government will face.

The full implementation of our Programme will depend in many instances on continued strong growth in the economy, as all policies will be subject to the overriding requirement to stay within the terms of the EU Growth and Stability Pact and the Maastricht Criteria.

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SEVEN KEY CONCERNS OF THE IRISH PEOPLE

NORTHERN IRELAND

The priority of Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will be to create a lasting peace on this island based on justice, friendship and cooperation between people of different traditions. The immediate task will be to revive the peace process through :

Securing, through the unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire, a final and lasting cessation of violence;

The establishment of inclusive and substantive all-party negotiations in the three strand process, leading to a political settlement. The Government's negotiating position will be based on the Downing Street Declaration, the Framework Document, the Mitchell Principles and the draft Report of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation. The aim is a settlement that will include a new political dispensation, involving genuine parity of esteem, equality of treatment and of recognition for both communities; a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland; the maximum degree of partnership-based government in Northern Ireland; new policing structures which will enjoy cross-community support; and effective North-South bodies;

Building confidence on all sides, based on mutual acceptance of the principle of consent, and focused on cultural identity, human rights, economic development in areas of deprivation, and issues of equality;

Raising the level of North-South economic co-operation in areas of mutual advantage with appropriate Government support;

Developing a new quality in British-Irish relations, focusing also on the broader interests of the two countries.

CRIME

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government are committed to taking the tough measures needed to deal with the crime issue.

We will adopt a zero tolerance policy towards crime, including white-collar crime. This means effective law enforcement, while at the same time addressing the factors which contribute to crime – economic deprivation, educational disadvantage and social exclusion. The needs of victims must be central and a comprehensive Charter for the Victims of Crime will be implemented.

Key priorities will include:

Strengthening the Garda Síochána – increasing numbers by 1,200, to reach the full complement of 12,000;

An independent Prisons Authority will be established to manage the country's detention system, and a Prisons Inspectorate will also be put in place;

An extra 1,000 prison spaces will be provided in the first two years, including a new remand prison, with 2,000 spaces to be provided in total. Temporary accommodation will be provided to cope with the immediate crisis. The private sector will be invited to design and build new prisons which can then be leased and managed by the Prison Authority;

To enable the Gardaí to concentrate on crime control, a community warden service will be recruited by local authorities in order to relieve their workload;

An independent Parole and Remission Board will be established;

An independent Courts Service will be set up to manage the system more efficiently;

Fast-track trials will be introduced for certain categories of serious offences;

A witness protection programme and plea-bargaining will be put in place;

There will be an automatic asset enquiry for certain offences at sentence stage;

Review of the right to silence.

DRUGS

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government recognise the need to combat the drugs problem, one of the root causes of crime in Irish society.

The overall strategy for dealing with drugs and drug-related crime will be based on an integrated philosophy of prevention, education, detoxification and rehabilitation, ultimately leading to employment and re-integration into normal society.

We will have an uncompromising approach to drug dealers and a more caring approach to drug addicts.

Key priorities will include:

Coordination of a national drugs strategy through a Cabinet sub-committee;

Implementation of a zero tolerance approach towards drug dealers and drug pushers and ensure that Operation Dóchas is continued and expanded;

Use of the justice system imaginatively by creating a Drug Court system which would involve court-supervised treatment programmes as an alternative to criminal prosecution for less serious drug-related offences;

Offering nationwide rehabilitation services for drug addicts, and link rehabilitation programmes directly to employment opportunities;

Establishing a custodial detention centre for convicted addicts and remand prisoners who are addicted, with all other prisons to be drug-free.

TAXATION

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government recognise the need to reduce the burden of personal taxation in order to reward effort and give people an incentive to take up work.

We will reduce the basic rate of income tax to 20% and the higher rate to 42% over the next five years. If economic circumstances permit, the objective will be to reduce the higher rate to 40% during the lifetime of the Government.

Basic allowances will be increased, and will rise by at least the rate of inflation at each budget.

The standard-rate tax band will be broadened over five years to ensure that 80% of taxpayers do not pay tax at the higher rate on any part of their income.

We will also reduce the burden of PRSI and levies, with a particular emphasis on helping those in low-paid employment.

Progress on these fronts will commence with the November 1997 Budget. We will also honour the taxation commitments which were made by way of joint statement by the two parties in the course of the election campaign.

AN INCLUSIVE SOCIETY

Making an all-out assault on disadvantage

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will seek to establish an inclusive society where all citizens have the opportunity and the incentive to participate fully in the social and economic life of the country. We want everyone to have a chance to contribute to the wealth of the nation and to share in the benefits of economic growth.

We will address urgently the issues of exclusion, marginalisation and poverty, and we will halt the continuing drift towards the development of a two-tier society in Ireland.

Key priorities will include:

Ensuring that people with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate fully in all aspects of society;

Creating a new deal for the travelling community;

Attacking fraud and abuse of social welfare, freeing up resources to address real needs;

The introduction of a national minimum hourly wage, following early consultation with the social partners;

Investing in education at all levels, especially at pre-school and primary stages, to ensure equal access and opportunity for all pupils to achieve their educational potential;

Progressively relaxing the qualifying criteria for the carer's allowance to ensure that more carers can get the benefit;

Establishing a 25,000 place programme to tackle long-term unemployment which will pay the going rate for the job.

Producing a Green Paper on the issue of Basic Income within two years.

EDUCATION

Learning should be lifelong, and our educational system must respond accordingly. Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will focus on people's needs and parental choice rather than on bureaucratic or administrative structures.

Key priorities will include:

The provision of a specific budget for pre-school education;

To give primary education a clear priority in allocating resources, including the provision of remedial teachers and resources for special learning

difficulties; one teacher schools with ten pupils or over to receive a second teacher, and renewal of sub-standard accommodation;

To achieve computer literacy throughout the schools system;

Recognition of the role of parents as the first teachers of their children by ensuring their role at all levels of school management and also by the introduction of the Parents as First Teachers Programme. Under PAFT, first time parents from deprived areas are visited by a trained educator/health visitor from the pre-natal stage until the child is three years of age;

Appointment of a high-powered group to examine the points system and provide a wider choice of curriculum for smaller secondary schools;

More resources to be allocated to Youthreach and a targeted programme developed to meet the needs of the 20,000 young people who do not complete the second level cycle;

To set up a National Psychological Service to address learning difficulties;

Renewed respect for the principle of academic freedom and autonomy at third level;

Equitable support of students attending PLC courses; increased support for post-graduate research.

ENVIRONMENT

Concern for the environment will be central to all policy decisions of Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government. We believe that the time has come to develop and implement an integrated environmental policy in partnership and consultation with local communities.

Key priorities will include:

Eco-auditing all policies;

Establishing a National Environment Partnership Forum;

Implementing waste management policies which reflect the priorities of

- Prevention
- Minimisation
- Reuse/Recycling
- Environmentally sustainable disposal;

Seeking the establishment of an independent EU Agency to take responsibility for monitoring nuclear installations in member States;

Continuing the campaign against Sellafield;

Establishing an Irish eco-label;

Extending the ban on bituminous coal to major urban areas.

SOCIAL ISSUES

HEALTH

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will deliver on priorities in healthcare, create a customer-focused healthcare service and target key healthcare areas for special attention.

Key priorities will include:

- Implementation of the recommendations of the Finlay Report;
- Tackle the crisis in hospital waiting lists;
- Substantially improve mental health and autistic services;
- Review medical card eligibility for large families and the elderly;
- Initiate comprehensive value-for-money audits for the health service and identify regional funding imbalances in the system, particularly in the provision of hospital services;
- National hospice plan will be developed;
- Support the establishment of a heart and lung transplant facility in Ireland;
- Consider a strategic alliance for the VHI.

THE FAMILY

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government are committed to maintaining the tradition of the family in Ireland which is one of our strongest national characteristics. It is a tradition which has focused on support for parents and their children.

We are committed to protecting the family through political, economic, social and other measures which will support the stability of the family. In particular, we recognise that many families are forced to live in situations of poverty which inhibits them from carrying out their role. The new family focus by Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats is designed to make families central to policy-making. Policies will be evaluated to monitor the effect on families of social policy.

Key priorities will include :

- Refocus tax and welfare system in favour of the family unit;
- Provide the mechanism to allow women, who take time out for family reasons, to continue contributions for pension purposes;
- Establish a national mediation service;
- Policies to address the effect of divorce on families;
- Parental leave;
- Regional family courts.

HOUSING

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government are committed to the deeply held ideal of so many Irish people and home ownership. We believe, and our policies reflect, our commitment to providing a suitable standard of accommodation for all our people.

Key priorities will include :

- A continuing house construction programme by local authorities and voluntary groups;
- Refurbishment of existing inadequate housing;
- Improvement and extension of Social Housing policy schemes generally, including rural re-settlement as an option;
- Undertaking an assessment of homelessness to develop a national strategy with special recognition of the housing needs of people with mental health problems;
- Maximum co-ordination of housing policy under one Department;
- Local Authorities developing serviced sites to accelerate the supply of new houses to meet rising demands and deflate escalating house prices.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government are committed to the realisation of true equality for women. We will ensure that women can realise their full potential in Irish society.

Key priorities will include:

- Implementation of the Second Report of the Commission on the Status of Women;
- Funding of Rape Crisis Centres;
- Separate legal representation in court for victims of rape and sexual assault;
- Treatment programme for sexual offenders. In particular, expand therapeutic treatment programme for juvenile sexual offenders;
- Register of sexual offenders;
- Review and improvement of maternity protection legislation;
- Ensure female representation on Social Partnership and other negotiating bodies;
- The promotion of the status of women at work, in business and at home;
- Introduction of tax allowance for carers of children, elderly and disabled in the home;
- Funding and provision of refuge accommodation and support services for women fleeing domestic violence;
- Establishment of special home to Business' Register for women in the home;
- Funding of women's voluntary agencies;
- Ensure that women attain their full potential within the public service;
- Opportunities will be made available to women in the home to undertake training in order to return to work.

CHILDREN

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government are aware of the impact of Government on children's lives. We will be more conscious, in our decision making process, to be more sensitive to children and childcare issues, and to be caring to the needs of children in all our dealings with them and their parents.

Key priorities will include :

- Enact comprehensive juvenile justice legislation;
- Full implementation of the recommendations of the Kilkenny Incest Enquiry Report, Kelly Fitzgerald Report and Madonna House Report;
- Mandatory reporting of child abuse;
- Review of all investigative, therapeutic and prevention services to protect children, including:
 - Community Care Child Protection Services
 - Office of the D.P.P.
 - Courts system
- Services to address child begging, child homelessness and child prostitution;
- The All-Party Committee on the Constitution will consider a constitutional amendment to underpin the individual rights of children;
- Implementing the Child Care Act in full, including those provisions relating to the regulation of child care and crèche facilities;
- Establishing a voluntary contact register for adult adoptees to contact birth parents.

CARING FOR OUR OLDER PEOPLE

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government recognise that our older people have helped to build up the country into what it is today. It was their sacrifices, their taxes and their efforts which have helped to create the economic prosperity which we now enjoy. In the true spirit of caring, we propose to repay their efforts.

Key priorities will include :

- To ensure that the health and social service is responsive to their needs;
- Higher tax free allowance for older people and a new tax allowance for those who care for the aged;
- Substantial social welfare increases (including increase in Old Age Pension to £100 per week over 5 year period);
- Protection of Public Service pensions;
- Review guidelines for eligibility for medical cards;
- Private nursing home subvention to be increased;
- Promote policies to assist concept of independent living;
- Value of Carers Allowance to be increased in real terms.

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government are committed to radical change to ensure that the needs and aspirations of people with disabilities, their families, carers and

advocates are comprehensively addressed. We are committed to ensuring that disability is placed where it belongs, on the agenda of every Government department and public body. Our policy is based on the core principles of promoting empowerment through appropriate, accessible and responsive services.

We recognise that disability is one of the most important social issues facing Ireland today.

Key priorities will include :

- Implementation of Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities;
- An urgent review of the Supreme Court decision on the Employment Equality Bill as it affects people with disabilities;
- Overhaul the means by which the State supports the incomes of people with disabilities, reduce unnecessary bureaucracy in dealing with health agencies, and review the operation of the Disabled Person's Grant to meet the real needs of all applicants;
- Provision of adequate resources for National Respite Care;
- Introduction of a co-ordinated and comprehensive approach to promoting access by people with disabilities to the use of public spaces and facilities, and to the whole of the transport chain;
- Provision of adequate residential facilities for those with mental handicap and autism;
- New tax allowance for carers of people with disabilities.

SPORT & LEISURE

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will recognise the value of sport and leisure to the physical and mental health of each individual, especially in the role they can play in fostering a sense of community identity in even the most deprived areas.

Key priorities will include :

- Greater emphasis on sport and physical training in school curriculum;
- More joint venture provision of national regional sports and recreational facilities, including tax incentives to encourage private sector involvement;
- Invite proposals for a national 50 metre swimming pool;
- Community facilitators for disadvantaged areas;
- Local authority sport and leisure officers to be appointed;
- Increased lottery funding for sports;
- Creation of new National Sports Council;
- Increase State funding for Special Olympics in Ireland.

BUILDING ON OUR ECONOMIC PROGRESS

ECONOMIC POLICY AND EMPLOYMENT

Ireland is now well positioned for sustained economic growth. With the right framework for the future, we can achieve a further major leap forward, to higher living standards and lower rates of unemployment.

Key priorities of Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will include :

- The further encouragement of a home-based industrial/manufacturing sector with export potential, and balanced regional development;
- Enhancing information and communication technologies, to encourage the development of new enterprises and new forms of work, complementing jobs growth in existing manufacturing and services firms;
- Substantial emphasis on quality and effectiveness in public expenditure programmes;
- The promotion of enterprise by establishing an environment which is conducive to innovation and commercial risk-taking;
- Growing and improving access to employment through a major drive aimed at raising the skills profile of people, through education and higher investment by firms in training and human resources development;
- An agreed plan for the investment of private, public and Euro funds from 1999.

SUSTAINING ECONOMIC GROWTH

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will aim for tighter management of the economy, so as to maximise the long-term potential for growth, jobs, social inclusion and improved living standards for all.

Key priorities will include :

- To run a current budget surplus;
- To eliminate Exchequer borrowing over the next two to three years, if present conditions continue, so as to reduce servicing costs on a national debt of £30 billion, which preempts half the receipts of income tax;
- To limit net current spending growth to 4%, which is broadly equivalent to the 2% growth in real terms agreed in Partnership 2000, and capital spending growth to 5% on average up to 1999, and to reduce overall Government spending as a share of national output;
- To fulfil the terms and commitments of Partnership 2000.

EMU

A major task of Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will be to ensure that the Irish economy copes successfully with the challenges of entry into EMU in accordance with the provisions in the Maastricht Treaty, particularly in the initial absence of Britain. In principle, EMU will be good for Irish business and Irish jobs through lower interest rates, reduction of exchange rate risks and savings in transactions costs, making Ireland more attractive for the purposes of tourism, trade and investment. Successful EMU entry will require :

- Tighter fiscal discipline;
- Support for full observance of the Maastricht criteria across Europe;
- Support for European-wide employment measures;
- Full consultation with the exposed sectors of the economy about the potential problems faced by them, so as to ensure that all sectors of the workforce derive equal advantage from EMU membership;
- Taking full account of the possible effects of EMU participation in the negotiation of the next social partnership agreement;
- Urgent consultation with the social partners in the event of any economic developments post-EMU entry that would seriously threaten employment;
- Negotiating the continuation of EU Structural Funds, so as to avoid or mitigate any sudden shock to the Irish economy.

ENTERPRISE

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will support industry in creating more jobs, encourage entrepreneurship, make life easier for small businesses, recognise the important role of Science, Technology and Innovation, and put new emphasis on protecting existing jobs through training and deepening company competitiveness.

Key priorities will include :

- The development of a strategy to deal with the likely contraction of EU funds for training, enterprise and infrastructure after 1999;
- Progressive changes in the corporation tax regime to secure the delivery of a standard 10% rate by the year 2010;
- Refocusing enterprise policy to ensure that we can develop and grow enterprise across all regions;
- The utilisation of the tax system including capital taxes to encourage entrepreneurship;
- Keeping the concerns, and growth potential, of the small business and services sectors at the top of the political agenda;
- Delivering a client-centred approach in the State's interface with business;
- Streamlining structures and programmes to help deliver increased competitiveness, jobs and exports;
- Enhancing the provision of seed and development capital for start-up businesses and young companies with growth potential;
- The upgrading of the early-warning systems to identify emerging competitive difficulties in companies;
- The development of a new system of traineeships and the examination of the future role and structures of FÁS

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government believe that science, technology and innovation (STI) are key elements in national competitiveness. We are committed to the development of an STI infrastructure capable of supporting the researchers, technicians and innovators needed to underpin the competitiveness of Irish firms in the dynamic global environment of the new millennium.

We will increase the throughput of computer and electronics graduates through our colleges and universities to keep pace with demand and ensure that Ireland will continue to be attractive as a base for such industries.

AGRICULTURE

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government recognise that Agriculture and Food are a cornerstone of the Irish economy and will remain so into the next century. Irish agriculture and its associated food industry has the potential to contribute to economic growth and rural prosperity. Our aim is to carry out the most fundamental reform of the Department of Agriculture since it was set up in 1900. We will focus the Department on its central mission of developing policy to ensure that Irish agriculture reaches its full potential. The status quo has failed farmers and consumers alike.

Key priorities will include:

- The establishment of an independent agency to administer FEOGA and other payments such as premia to farmers. This agency will be under the general policy direction of the Minister and will have its own accounting officer;
- To ensure the sustainability of agriculture through the restoration of the Control of Farmyard Pollution scheme and to achieve the extension of REPS to ten years;
- To ensure support for the maximum number of family farms and to achieve a more equitable distribution of support payments by reforming the existing direct payments scheme;
- To put in place a new scheme to encourage on-farm investment. The limited grant aid will be targeted at smaller farmers with low incomes;
- To support the development of a sustainable forestry industry that has a balance of species, to recognise the key role of farm families in forestry, and to insist on proper maintenance as a condition of drawing down premia;
- To recognise the need to support young farmers by ensuring adequate provision for access to quota or production rights by qualified young farmers, and stamp duty exemption for young farmers taking over family holdings;
- To recognise the role of women in agriculture by setting up a special advisory committee to advise on and monitor progress, with policy initiatives to support women in agriculture. This will include setting up a network of women in farming, and addressing the specific training requirements of women in agriculture;
- To actively encourage the development of the organic farm sector;
- To ensure that Ireland's vital national interests, and the significance of agriculture to the Irish economy, are fully reflected in future negotiations on CAP reform and the new World Trade Agreement.

FOOD

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government recognise that our people at home and our customers abroad demand produce whose quality is totally assured. Increased food exports are crucial for Ireland's future prosperity. Consumer confidence in Irish food products dictates that we must be in a position to give uncompromised and independently verifiable assurances as to its quality and purity. We recognise the importance of environmental protection as a crucial element in our success as a food-producing country. Irish Food policy must have a total consumer focus. This is the only way we can increase our market share and provide a long term future for Irish products.

Key priorities will include:

- The establishment of a statutory independent science-based Food Safety and Quality Authority to take over all current functions that relate to the regulation of the food industry, including traceability from farm to retail and restaurant level. Other functions will include animal and plant health, approval of drugs and chemicals for use in food production, implementation of safety assurance schemes at farm and factory level. Staff from the Department of Agriculture and the multiplicity of other agencies involved will be transferred to the new Authority. The Authority will come under the policy direction of the Minister for Health, but will have its own board and Accounting officer;
- To ensure the continuing development of the food industry the Government will reestablish the Office of Food within the Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry to have overall responsibility for the development and marketing of the food industry;
- An Bord Bia will be charged with placing particular emphasis on responding to the needs of the food industry at company level. Bord Bia and Teagasc National Food centres will be charged with the key role of acting as sensitive monitors in the early identification of developmental needs within our food industry and devising timely responses to such needs;
- To initiate a National Human Resource Programme which will ensure the ready availability of strategic managers skilled in the various sub-specialities within the food industry. The ever increasing importance of foreign language training will be particularly emphasised.

MARINE

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will forge a new partnership between all the groups who depend on the Marine for their livelihood or leisure. The thrust of policy in the first instance must be to secure and enhance the livelihoods of the coastal communities who depend on the sea for their future. The strategic importance of our shipping industry, and the necessary infrastructure to handle ever increasing volumes of tourism and trade, has to be underpinned by continuing investment and the maintenance of competitiveness.

Key priorities will include :

- Setting out a coherent strategy for the sea fishing industry and fighting to retain our existing fish quotas while securing effective EU recognition of the special needs of Ireland to defend our Marine territory;

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- Seeking to up-grade our fleet and to make the industry attractive to providers of capital by examining the provision of tax breaks and subsidised loans;
- Seeking EU assistance for the modernisation of the white fish fleet;
- Seeking the banning of flags-of-convenience-fishing-vessels from Irish waters;
- Maximising the amount of fish processed to a second or higher level;
- Developing aquaculture in a fair, equitable and environmentally-conscious way;
- Implementing the recommendations of the Fishery Vessel Safety Review Group;
- Providing adequate funds for the development of inland fisheries;
- Protecting and developing our coast through Coastal Zone Management;
- Developing a comprehensive policy for the shipping industry;
- Developing a strategic policy for commercial harbours;
- Transferring small harbours to local control to develop marine leisure activities.

TOURISM

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will chart a new strategic direction for Irish tourism, accelerate the growth of rural tourism and address recruitment and training deficiencies.

Key priorities will include :

- Expediting the establishment of the National Conference Centre;
- A re-assessment of the new Bord Fáilte marketing campaign;
- Examining how low fare policies by airlines and ferry companies can be further developed;
- Encouraging the further development of standards in tourism products and services;
- The establishment of a Tourism Development Fund to deal with the needs of the industry in the post-1999 EU Funds situation;
- The provision of additional resources for the OTMI scheme promoting Ireland overseas with a greater regional focus;
- Use of the tax system to encourage investment in tourism;
- Upgrading the Regional Tourism Organisations;
- Encouraging greater co-operation between North and South in promoting all areas of the island;
- Developing Urban Heritage and Rural Tourism.

INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will make public administration more relevant to the citizen, for whom the service exists.

Key priorities will include :

- Focusing public administration on needs of customer;
- Revitalising the public service through the removal of barriers which have restricted the performance and job satisfaction of Public Servants; new impetus to be given to the Strategic Management Initiative;
- Making the Oireachtas more relevant to everyday concerns of citizens;
- Restoring public confidence in public life through a credible policing mechanism for ethical issues;
- Expanding the remit of the Ombudsman to include legal, medical and other areas;
- Fundamental review and evaluation of the effectiveness of the National Lottery;
- Raising of cap on lottery prize money generally;
- Review of the efficiency of the Law Offices of the State including the Chief State Solicitor's Office and the Director of Public Prosecutions;
- Re-establish the All-Party Committee on the Constitution;
- Review of the Electoral System;
- Implementation of the recommendations of the McCracken Tribunal.

THE STATE SECTOR

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will take a practical rather than an ideological approach to the future of the State companies, working in the spirit of social partnership and consensus. We will do whatever is necessary to enable them to be competitive and cost-effective as providers of vital public services to the benefit of the consumer. Additional capital needs, where they cannot be provided internally, may be provided by means of strategic alliances, which may also enlarge their market, and by long-term pension-fund and employee shareholding. Our aim is to have growing, vigorous, healthy companies, serving the public well and giving high quality employment at home and abroad, regardless of any evolution in structure.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government are committed to the restoration of real decision-making and power to local authorities and local people.

To do this we believe it is necessary to put in place proper funding of local government and to give local discretion on how that funding is spent.

Key priorities will include :

- Establishing a Statutory Local Government Fund which will be a fixed percentage of national taxation;

- Allowing greater discretion to local authorities in spending priorities based on their performance and the value for money they obtain;
- 'Capping' increases of commercial rates;
- Financing county road improvements from the national motor tax receipts with suitable 'equalisation'; such funding to take into account the findings of National County Roads Survey;
- Introducing comprehensive Value for Money Audits for all Local Authorities;
- Improving efficiency throughout the system;
- Enhancing the concept of customer service in local government;
- Removing the 'democratic deficit' by restoring real power to the elected members;
- Facilitating a new partnership with the community and voluntary sector.

PLANNING

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government believe it is now time to start the process of updating and consolidating our planning laws to prepare for the challenges of the new millennium.

Our objectives in this are (1) to ensure the planned and orderly development of all areas (2) to facilitate maximum participation in the planning process (3) to ensure the principle of sustainable development is at the centre of the planning process.

Key priorities will include :

- A complete review of the Planning Laws including how they relate to local authority developments;
- Increasing public participation in the planning process;
- 7 year Development Plans;
- Provision of more qualified planners at local authority level;
- Introducing similar provisions to those of the Ethics in Public Office Act to apply to local authorities;
- Conservation legislation to protect and enhance our built environment.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will introduce a comprehensive Programme of Rural Development, by providing State Services at local level by decentralisation, by ensuring, as far as practicable, equality of infrastructure throughout the regions, by equalisation of utility charges as between urban and rural areas, and by an action plan to address the needs of our islands, including the access needs and the higher living costs for our island population.

Key priorities will include :

- A positive plan to ensure rural population stabilisation will be embarked on;
- All policies, fiscal, social welfare, educational etc, will be proofed to ensure that they do not discriminate against rural areas;

- All State services will be provided at local level and centrally organised services will be decentralised to ensure that every region gets its fair share;
- The principal of uniform charging for services will be adopted;
- The policies of development agencies will be re-organised so as to ensure that rural areas will get a fairer share of industrial and commercial development;
- Structures will be set up to enhance local rural development;
- Objective 1 status will be sought for the West of Ireland, the border regions and all other rural areas that are suffering from population decline for the post-1999 period.

TRANSPORT

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will put new momentum into our transport system, opening up new air links with the US and the Pacific Rim, encouraging regional airlines and regional airports, regenerating public transport and upgrading and maintaining our road network.

Key priorities will include :

- Resistance to EU plans to abolish duty-free shopping after June 1999;
- A concerted plan to ease traffic congestion;
- Investment in the mainline and suburban rail network, including a link to Dublin Airport;
- Re-energise the Dublin Light Rail project including the extension to Sandyford and study the option of putting LUAS underground in the city centre;
- Support the network of regional airports;
- Accelerate the upgrading of national primary and secondary routes;
- Ensure increased funding to maintain regional and county roads;
- Developing Ireland as a base for cruise liners;
- Providing adequate lanes for cyclists and walkways for pedestrians;
- Regeneration of public transport especially in Dublin and Cork;
- Encouraging commercial investment to accelerate improvement in national transport infrastructure.

ENERGY

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will follow new approaches in energy, conserve energy across the economy, manage EU-driven change, and aggressively pursue alternative sources of renewable energy.

Key priorities will include :

- The development of a competitive electricity sector in line with EU requirements;
- Securing EU support for the new peat station for the Midlands;
- Implementation of recommendations of the National Minerals Policy Review Group;

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- Extend natural gas as far as practicable to major towns and cities;
- Publish a Green Paper on environmentally-sustainable energy sources;
- Support for pilot projects using alternative energies;
- Set strict targets for energy reduction within all public sector organisations.
- Maximise the benefits to the Irish economy of oil exploration and discoveries.

NATIONAL ISSUES

AN GHAELIGE

Glacann Fianna Fáil agus an Páirtí Daonlathach leis mar cheart bunúsach go mbeadh fáil ag gach saoránach ar a chuid oidhreacht a shaibhriú trín gcúras oideachais agus i gcoitinne, trín teanga Gaeilge a fhoghlaim agus a chaomhnú chomh forleathan agus is féidir.

- Tacaíonn an Rialtas nua leis an bhfeachtas chun an Ghaeilge a bheith mar theanga oifigiúil san Aontas Eorpach, agus go mbeadh buanú na teanga ina chríteir le haghaidh pleanáil sna Gaeltachtaí;
- Cuirfear Plean Náisiúnta don Réamhscolaíocht agus don Ghaelscolaíocht le chéile ag obair linn leis na heagrais chaoi agus cuirfear Coiste Náisiúnta Comhordaithe ar bun le hionadaithe ú scoileanna na Gaeltachta, Gaelscoileanna agus ún Roinn Oideachais, chun forbairt cheart a dhéanamh ar scoileanna a mhúineann trí Ghaeilge. Cuirfear Coiste Náisiúnta ar bun láithreach a thabharfaidh faoi scrúdú iomlán a dhéanamh ar mhodhanna múinte na Gaeilge sa chúras oideachais, chun feabhas mór a chur ar chumas cainte agus cumarsáide, agus cuirfear Lar-ionad Acmhainní ar bun chun áiseanna cearta oideachasúla a chur ar fáil, le haghaidh foghlaimoirí na teanga;
- Go mbeadh freagracht ar Oifig Ombudsman a chinntiú go mbeadh an ceart dlíthiúil agus an deis laethúil ag pobal na Gaeilge a gcuid gnú a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge leis an Stát, leis na húdaráis áitiúla agus le fondúireachtaí poiblí. Déanfaidh an Oifig monatóireacht ar sholáthar seirbhísí trí Ghaeilge, i dtreo is go mbeidh polasaí cinnte dhátheangachais i bhfeidhm i gcúrsaí poiblí;
- Go mbeadh scar níos mú airgid á bhronnadh ag an gComhairle Ealaíona chun deiléail go cothrom le healaíon na Gaeilge ñ sé sin , le haon chúrsaí cultúrtha atá á dhéanamh nú á reachtáil trí Ghaeilge. ” tharla go bhfuil an Ghaeilge luaite go sonrach sa reachtaíocht maidir leis an gCrannchur Náisiúnta, measann an rialtas go mba chúir níos mú airgid a dháileadh ar chur chun cinn na Gaeilge;
- Go mbainfí lánúsáid as acmhainneacht /darás na Gaeltachta mar eagrais forbartha réigiúnach, in aon déabhlúidiú údaráis agus feidhmeanna ún lárchúras riaracháin phoiblí. Go ndéanfar forbairt ar thionscail agus ar thurasúireacht chultúrtha sa Gaeltacht;
- Go gcuirfear ar ceal na ciorraithe a rinneadh ar scéimeanna Roinn na Gaeltachta sa Gaeltacht;
- Déanfaidh an Rialtas athbhreithniú ar struchtúir na n-eagrais deonacha agus oifigiúil Ghaeilge go léir, le cinntiú go bhfuil an clár oibre is fearr curtha ar fáil acu, agus go bhfuil toradh fiúntach ar chaitheachas Stáit ar son phobal na Gaeilge agus lucht foghlamtha na Gaeilge.

ARTS, CULTURE, HERITAGE

Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government will stimulate the Arts throughout the country, conserve our heritage, encourage diversity and fair competition in broadcasting, accelerate the growth of the film and television industry and establish Ireland as a world centre for the music industry.

Key priorities will include :

Arts

- Modifying the school curriculum to place more emphasis on cultural and artistic activities;

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- Requiring local authorities to produce 3-year Cultural Development Plan;
- A budget of £26m for Arts Council in 1998; The Arts Council to examine support for Disabled Artists, and more regional emphasis;
- Special Tax Incentives to encourage Cultural Developments;
- Establishment of a National Cultural Institutions Council;
- Establishment of a Dublin Centre for Performing Arts, incorporating a Conservatoire;

Film

- Establishment of a Screen Commission, and an industry think-tank which would evaluate the effectiveness of existing schemes and incentives, and formulate a strategic plan for the future of the industry;

Music

- Encouragement of world class residential recording studios;
- Establishment of digital music libraries;
- A campaign to attract performing artists to live in Ireland;

Broadcasting

- Protecting viewing on RTE and proposed TV 3 of major domestic sporting events;
- Statutory Independence for T na G;
- Fostering Independent Radio Network including £500,000 Fund to set up and maintain transmission sites for Local Radios;

Heritage

- Developing a National Heritage Plan, and also local heritage plans;
- Full legal protection to sites of artistic, heritage and historical interest;
- Measures to promote the preservation of heritage dwellings;
- Reviewing the procedures for implementation of the Habitats Directive (Special Areas of Conservation).

DEFENCE

Fianna Fáil and Progressive Democrats in Government recognise that the Defence Forces are vital to our security. Our armed services play a multiplicity of roles at home from border security, to fishery patrols and an important part in the war against drugs. Our part in United Nations peace keeping forces has ensured an important role for Ireland on the world stage. We must stop the reactive ad hoc planning that has characterised the management of our Defence Forces. The Government in consultation with the Defence Forces will set down clear priorities in a definite timetable to ensure that efficiency and morale are significantly improved.

Key priorities will be :

- Draw up a White Paper on Defence Policy within one year to set out a clear strategy for the next ten years;
- Enhance the efficiency of the Defence Forces by delegating all day-to-day administration from the Department of Defence to the branches of the defence forces themselves;

- Replace the damaging stop-go policy of recruitment with continuous recruiting to achieve a target of 1,500 personnel over the next four years;
- Encourage the increased participation of women in the Defence Forces and ensure the facilities necessary for their full participation;
- Equip our Defence Forces adequately for an expanded role in international peacekeeping, upgrading of accommodation and operational capability;
- Redefine and enhance the role of the Air Corps, the Naval Service and the FCA.;
- Revitalise the 'Towards 2002' Programme for the Civil Defence and start planning for the first decade of the new millennium.

INTERNATIONAL & EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

Under Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in Government, Ireland will play a full and constructive role as a member of the international community.

Key priorities will include :

- Positive and constructive participation in the further building of Europe, taking account of our own specific traditions and interests;
- Protection of the interests of smaller member States in any institutional reform;
- Support for European co-operation on drug-trafficking;
- Ensuring a smooth transition to a new Structural Funds regime, taking account of regional imbalances in the country;
- Modernising the UN;
- Adopting an interim Overseas Development Assistance target of at least 0.45% of GNP by 2002 on the way to reaching the UN target of 0.7%;
- Implement the Refugee Act of 1996;
- Focusing Ireland's representation abroad by expanding the Ireland House concept.