

Eamon Ryan TD,  
Leader of the Green Party,  
Dáil Éireann,  
Leinster House,  
Dublin 2

April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Dear Eamon,

Thank you for your letter.

We welcome the desire of the Green Party to be involved in recovering, rebuilding and renewing Ireland in the aftermath of the COVID-19 Emergency and we respect the strong policy platform you outlined in your letter. None of us would have predicted the rapidity and shock that the world has experienced since both of our parties engaged with you separately in the aftermath of the General Election.

Ireland has changed significantly.

Over a thousand people have lost their lives, more than a million people are now in receipt of income supports from the State, while people are confined to their homes with daily life severely restricted and businesses closed.

Every community is making a concerted effort to save lives and to minimise the impact on our country's health service.

As outlined in the framework document both our parties will continue to be guided by and act on the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) as we emerge from this Emergency.

The next few months and years will be particularly difficult for people. It is important that we all do our utmost to build a Programme for Government that will enable Ireland to recover, rebuild and renew in the aftermath of the COVID-19 Emergency.

As outlined in your recent Party's manifesto "there is now just a decade to make the changes necessary to halt the warming of our planet and to save our natural world". We want to ensure that the recovery plan we put in place through the Programme for Government reflects that.

We believe this is in the best interest of the country.

We are conscious that some issues in your letter need to be teased out during talks, as do many of the items within our Framework Document. We also agree that it is crucial that a Programme for Government contains policies that are evidence based, implementable and sustainable.

We ask that after you receive this letter that we could meet soon to discuss these issues and hopefully begin work on a Programme for Government incorporating many of the other priorities you set out in your letter, those within our Framework Document and other important matters that need to be dealt with.

Below we respond to your seventeen questions as clearly as possible.

**1. Will you commit to an average annual reduction in greenhouse gas emissions of at least 7%?**

This time last year, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action published its landmark report which demonstrated the cross-party consensus that exists for strong climate action.

Under the Climate Action Plan, the average annual reduction in greenhouse gas emissions is estimated to be about 3% per annum over the next decade. In the Framework Document we commit to developing new more ambitious carbon reduction targets, underpinned by a clear road map for delivery.

In the last few months both the UN and the EU have set out more ambitious targets. In taking stronger climate action, our aim is to ensure that we do not make climate change a divisive issue.

We firmly believe that it is important to consult and persuade people and sectors to take the actions to ensure that we meet any new targets that are set.

We would like to understand and tease out with you through talks, the specific actions that would have to be taken to achieve at least an average 7% a year reduction. We all need to understand the impact it would have on employment, poverty, agricultural practice, public transport, regional development and on the different sections of society.

Considerable work will have to be done to outline where and when further carbon reductions could or should come from given that we will have to significantly reboot and revive the economy. No party will want to introduce changes that will jeopardise employment or increase levels of poverty or have a negative impact on rural and regional development.

We will need to identify and bring forward the climate actions that will support good quality, sustainable employment, balanced regional development and reduce poverty.

We all agree that a just transition should be at the core of making climate change a success. We will also need to consider the correct target for biogenic methane, on which the Climate Change Advisory Council have advised the application of a different target than that for other greenhouse gases.

We believe that within the first 100 days we should bring forward and enact a new Climate Bill that will enhance and strengthen the Climate Change Advisory Council, put a net zero target for 2050 into law and provide for five-year carbon budgets.

We look forward to discussing these hugely important issues with you.

**2. Will you commit to an ambitious programme of development of, and investment where necessary in, renewable energy infrastructure including off-shore wind, grid and interconnector upgrades and community energy projects?**

Yes. All parties have already committed to this and a 70% renewable target by 2030 in the Joint Oireachtas Report. Developing offshore renewables at scale offers an exciting opportunity for Ireland to become a world leader in ocean renewable power. The ambition should be not confined to supplying renewable power to our own grid but to become a significant exporter via grid interconnectivity with the UK and EU electricity grids.

The Irish Sea offshore wind projects will be the first to develop, but the massive potential of the western seaboard wind and wave resource must be central to government planning also. The exact nature of such an ambitious programme would obviously be developed through future talks.

**3. Will you commit to ending the issue of exploration licences for offshore gas exploration?**

Both of our parties are committed to a pathway to phase out all fossil fuel exploration licenses. As you know the outgoing Government already banned fracking onshore and introduced a moratorium on the issuing of new exploration licences for offshore oil exploration. We are open to introducing a similar policy on offshore gas exploration.

**4. Will you commit to ceasing the construction of new fossil fuel infrastructure, particularly LNG import terminals that could allow the entry of unconventional liquefied natural gas into the Irish energy mix?**

Both of our parties accept that as we move towards carbon neutrality, it does not make sense to build new large-scale fossil fuel infrastructure such as liquid natural gas import terminals.

While additional security of gas supply could be beneficial, we have secure supply at present from the Corrib Gas Field and the United Kingdom.

We both believe that we all would need to have a shared understanding of what is meant by new fossil fuel infrastructure, what type scale does this relate to, and whether this proposed ban would apply to State infrastructure or to private sector infrastructure as well.

We would also need to have a clear understanding of the State's powers in this area and to what extent they are limited by European law and international treaties. We also need to be aware that the European Union (EU) is reviewing its own approach to gas projects due to a recent report by the EU Ombudsman.

We would need to ensure that for those areas which were expecting economic development arising from new fossil fuel infrastructure that localised development plans are put in place to stimulate economic activity. As part of that we must consider how strategic investment in the Shannon estuary and port infrastructure could support the development of renewable energy.

**5. Will you commit to the exclusive provision of public housing, social housing and cost rental housing on public lands?**

Home ownership is a core aim of both of our parties. We believe that public land should be used to the benefit of all the public, not just those who qualify for social or cost-rental schemes. Much of the public land suitable for housing is located close to city centres and is often in areas where it is very difficult for people from those areas to find a new home to buy. We would not like to see people who want to own their own home to be the only ones frozen out.

We see the State taking a more interventionist approach to the housing market through the local authorities and the Land Development Agency. This new approach will involve enabling the Land Development Agency to build new homes for affordable and private purchase, social housing, and cost-rental accommodation.

We are also proposing in the Framework Document that local authorities make serviced sites available within the footprint of our smaller towns and villages so that first-time buyers and downsizers can purchase those sites and build homes. This would help ensure vibrancy and repopulation in many smaller towns and villages.

**6. Will you commit to prioritising urban renewal in line with a 'Town Centre First' model?**

We would like to give equal priority to urban and rural renewal. We are open to having more discussions on the 'Town Centre First' model. The Scottish Government agreed this policy in 2014 and one of the many positives is that empty properties and homes were brought back to use as a result.

Both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are committed to a strong programme of urban renewal, focused on ensuring that there is life in our towns and villages. This will reduce dereliction and vacancy (for example making the Compulsory Purchase Order legislation more straightforward for local authorities to use). We will also support enterprises on our main streets, as well as measures to encourage people to live in the footprint of our towns and village and especially in their centres.

**7. Will you commit to a comprehensive deep retrofit programme as part of a programme for government?**

Yes. We can discuss the exact nature of such a programme including scale and funding mechanisms. We believe that the approach being developed in the midlands by the Just Transition Fund, with an area-based aggregated model for accelerated delivery, will be very important for informing this work.

**8. Will you commit to convening a social dialogue process representative of all key stakeholders with a view to developing of a new social contract?**

We are open to a wide and deep consultation with all sectors of society in developing the new social contract. We can discuss the most effective and inclusive way of doing this in talks, conscious of the need to ensure that the widest range of voices are heard, and the role of the Oireachtas and Government in policy formation is respected.

**9. Will you commit to working towards ending the Direct Provision system and replacing it with a not-for-profit system based on accommodation provided through existing or new approved housing bodies?**

Yes. This will take time, but both of our parties are committed to achieving the standards set out in the McMahon Report such as own-door and self-catering accommodation and we need to be conscious of other priorities within the housing sector also. We can discuss this further when we meet.

**10. Will you commit to setting us on a clear and certain path to meeting our UN obligation to spend 0.7% of our national income on Overseas Development Aid?**

Yes, we have already committed to reaching this target by 2030 in our Framework Document. The exact nature of the pathway to be the subject of negotiations and having regard to the national finances.

We need to be conscious that a purely percentage based approach does not necessarily help the most vulnerable internationally. As you know Ireland will get much closer to the target this year due to a fall in Gross National Income (GNI).

**11. Will you commit to the development of a national land use plan which will inform both the new national economic plan and the new social contract?**

Yes. We can agree to developing a national land use plan, and discuss how best to do this. We think there may also value in developing a similar plan for our marine resources and would look forward to considering this during Programme for Government talks.

**12. Will you commit to rebalancing our transport infrastructure spend, dedicating at least 20% of infrastructure expenditure in transport to cycling and walking and ensuring that other public transport infrastructure investment is allocated at least two-thirds of the remaining infrastructure budget?**

As is set out in the Framework Document we are committed to increasing the number of daily journeys by foot and bicycle, as well as investing more in public transport.

We do commit to increasing capital expenditure in walking and cycling areas and we want to discuss the best way that this should be done taking into consideration the pipeline and quality of projects.

We can commit to ensuring that in terms of new transport infrastructure, a 2:1 ratio of expenditure for public transport to roads is achieved. However, we believe it is important not to include within this ratio expenditure spending on required maintenance and upkeep of the existing transport network which is required for safety and connectivity.

**13. Will you commit to establishing a trial of Universal Basic Income (UBI) within the lifetime of the next Government?**

We are willing to discuss Universal Basis Income as part of the Programme for Government talks and, what, other countries have learned from their recent trials of same. Both our parties note that Ireland's tax and social welfare regime is acknowledged as one of the most effective in the European Union and among OECD member-states at reducing income inequality.

We have committed in the Framework Document to valuing those in low paid employment by progressing to a living wage over the lifetime of the next government.

**14. Will you commit to the revision of the existing National Development Plan so that we can meet our New Social Contract goals and climate change targets?**

The current National Development Plan runs from 2018 to 2027. We will bring forward the review for the NDP and it would be pragmatic to do so in the first 100 days of a new government. This review could be, if agreed as part of the National Economic Plan, or one of the first actions arising from it.

It should be guided by the principles set down in the Programme for Government, which would include those but also others such as balanced regional development.

**15. Will you commit to a review of the State's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, undertaken by the Oireachtas, to enable us to learn lessons for the future?**

Yes. We have already agreed to reviewing the State's response to the COVID-19 Emergency to learn lessons for the future in the framework document. This could certainly be undertaken by the Oireachtas with the access to outside expertise.

We can discuss the parameters, terms of reference and the timing of this review when we meet. We are both conscious that COVID-19 will be with us all for quite some time yet.

**16. Will you provide a clear and detailed analysis of how your Joint Framework Document is to be financed?**

In normal discussions on a Programme for Government this would be readily available. Unfortunately, we are not in normal times.

You will have seen the recently published Stability Programme Update (SPU) where it suggests that Gross Domestic Product could fall by 10.5% this year.

Unemployment could hit 22% in the second quarter. The debt to GDP ratio is forecast to increase by 10%.

Arising from the COVID-19 Emergency, most EU member states will have an excessive deficit. We both hope that the right decisions are made at international and European level that Ireland can avoid the pain of the last economic crisis. However, we are under no illusion on how challenging the coming years will be and that is why we strongly believe that we must have a government in place, with a clear majority, that will help steer our country through this next critical period. Its first task will be the formulation of an economic plan.

The Framework Document is a starting point for discussion not an end point. We believe that is possible over a full-government term to make significant progress on each of the Framework Document Missions.

Nobody knows with any reasonable degree of accuracy how long the COVID-19 Emergency will last, how slow, or fast the recovery will be or what form of Brexit will take place in 2021.

However, we propose an economic approach informed by the following principles:

- Borrowing at affordable rates to fund the deficit, in order to avoid the need for austerity and to stimulate a recovery. We believe this will be possible, at least initially, given the current policy of the European Central Bank and the current creditworthiness of the Irish state.
- Reduce the deficit once the economy returns to growth and doing so in a gradual way so that growth is not stunted.
- Eliminate borrowing for current spending first while still borrowing for capital spending in areas like housing, healthcare infrastructure, public transport, education, and climate action.
- Then move to a broadly balanced budget.
- Complying with the European Union Fiscal Rules and the Stability and Growth Pact, noting that the general escape clause has been activated due to the COVID-19 Emergency.

In developing a Programme for Government, we are committed to ensuring that, as much economic analysis as possible will be taken into consideration. Projections are changing daily at the moment.

#### **17. Will you commit to publishing and implementing a Green Procurement Policy?**

Yes. Every public body should have a climate mandate and key element of this mandate will be using public procurement to implement change green public procurement (GPP) is about leveraging the State's purchasing power to choose more environmentally friendly goods works and services. We can discuss how this can be fully developed and implemented.

#### **Conclusion**

At a time of genuine crisis, we welcome the fact that the Green Party is giving serious consideration to taking part in Programme for Government talks. We believe that working together we could implement many transformative policy changes across many areas. As mentioned earlier direct discussion between our parties would allow us to tease out any issues arising from the recent letters and the Framework document and hopefully enable us to move to Programme for Government talks.

Yours sincerely,



Leo Varadkar TD



Micheál Martin TD