

Colleagues, friends,

This will be a year of profound journeys for Ireland.

We'll journey back in time, to 1916, to reflect on the spark that lit the flame of independence.

We'll journey to airports, ferries and train stations, to see our loved ones return home in great numbers as the recovery gathers pace.

And we'll journey to the polls in our millions, to chart the way forward for our country.

We'll start from different places and with different emotions.

But we'll share the same objectives, concerns, and desires.

That our families are healthy and happy.

That our communities are safe and prosperous.

And that there is love, tolerance and acceptance for all our citizens.

These are the building blocks of Ireland's future.

The future envisaged by the founder of our party, James Connolly, in the Proclamation he signed one hundred years ago.

Connolly co-founded Labour in 1912 because he knew Labour was needed.

Needed to stand up for working people and progressive politics.

To stand up for fairness, equality and freedom.

Since then, Labour has fought many battles that have changed Ireland for the better.

So tonight, I want to talk to you about the battles that remain.

The journeys we have yet to take.

About the decade of opportunity within our reach.

About the risks we face along the way.

And about staying the course together to overcome them.

Labour entered government in 2011 to stand up for our children's right to have a future worthy of their talents.

We entered government to stand up for the men and women who lost their jobs and way of life as a result of the crash.

We entered government to stand up for older people fearful about their pension and peace of mind.

We entered government to end the worst economic crisis we've ever known.

The true test of any government is whether it leaves our country in a better place.

Fianna Fail inherited a boom and blew it.

Labour, with our coalition partners Fine Gael, inherited a ruin and rebuilt it.

But the people did the hard yards.

And that extraordinary effort - that extraordinary sacrifice – is paying off.

In 2011, we were in deep crisis.

Now we have the fastest growing economy in Europe.

In 2011, we were approaching half a million people unemployed.

Now, we're adding more than one thousand new jobs a week and are on the road to full employment.

In 2011, Fianna Fail had cut the minimum wage by €1 an hour.

Labour has increased it – twice.

Now, it's worth more than €3,000 extra a year to a low-paid worker.

In 2011, Fianna Fail's savage Universal Social Charge slashed people's wages.

Now, we've taken 700,000 people out of the USC net and reduced it for low and middle income workers.

In short, we're in a much better place than five years ago.

It wasn't a journey any of us would have wished for our families, friends and neighbours.

But working together, we've driven a strong recovery.

And the benefits are coming through.

135,000 new jobs.

And behind every new job, a person or family feeling the benefits of recovery in their own lives.

This month, every worker has more take-home pay because of the USC reductions.

Because of the increase in the minimum wage.

Because of the new tax credit for the self-employed.

Child Benefit is increasing to help families.

And we've introduced a package to help older people.

We've restored the Christmas Bonus that Fianna Fail so cruelly axed.

We've increased the pension and raised the Fuel Allowance.

These are modest but steady steps in our wider plan:

To use strong and stable economic growth to build a decent society.

Right now, the recovery remains incomplete, and there are risks ahead.

The world economy remains in a fragile state.

Stability is vital.

The worst mistake we could make now is to squander our hard-earned progress by gambling on uncertainty.

With the party who caused the crash and the party who would have made it worse.

We know who they are.

I grew up in a working class home.

So when I look at the country's finances, I think of all the people who sit at their kitchen table, juggling the family finances.

Making a little go a long way.

Never spending what they cannot afford.

And from my accountancy days, I know so many small business owners do exactly the same thing.

They sit at the same tables, try to balance the books, pay the wages, and find funds to grow the business.

We in Government have a duty to them.

A duty to every person and family who has sat at a kitchen table during the crisis and wondered how they'd last until pay-day, or cover the pay-roll.

Our duty to them – to you – is to sustain the recovery.

Make sure we never go back.

No return to crisis.

So if something isn't affordable or responsible, we won't do it.

And we'll steadily reduce our national debt so that we're prepared for any trouble that lies ahead.

Sound public finances are the bedrock of everything we do.

From Ruairi Quinn in the 90s to Brendan Howlin today, Labour's track record of managing the public finances is second to none.

This is central to our core task.

To build a decent society, not just a strong economy.

That requires careful balance.

The balance that ensured Labour in Government strengthened workers' rights in the teeth of the worst recession we've known.

The balance that stresses public investment to strengthen our communities.

The balance that recognises nurses, teachers, gardaí and other public servants as a vital asset to our society, not a drain on it.

The balance that gave priority to USC reductions for low and middle-income workers.

The balance that paved the way for Ireland to vote yes to love, and yes to equality.

That's what we bring to the table that nobody else does.

I'm proud to lead a party tolerant of all creeds and none.

A party that stands up for our people's future.

As a result of the marriage equality referendum, every child will grow up knowing their country accepts them.

Whoever it is they grow up to be, and whoever it is they grow up to love.

I was never prouder of the Labour Party than on that joyful Saturday last May.

I was never prouder of Ireland.

But the journey to create a modern Ireland is not over.

Some time ago, I spoke with a woman whose unborn baby had been diagnosed with a fatal foetal abnormality.

That baby was much wanted, much loved - but had no chance of surviving to term.

In such tragic circumstances, some women will wish to see out their pregnancy.

Some will not, and it's not right that our answer is to send them abroad.

Sending women abroad was the 20th century answer – and it was the wrong answer.

It's not the answer of a compassionate state.

Labour, if returned, will deliver a referendum on this issue in the next government.

We'll make the case for the 8th Amendment to go.

Growing up, I saw the struggle that families without work had to endure.

As a result, I've an abiding belief in the importance of jobs and opportunity.

Secure and fairly paid work is the single best protection against poverty.

The single best path to increased prosperity.

So our priority is a job for everyone who wants one by 2018.

I want to see every young person having a range of opportunities, from college to work-place training.

So we'll create 50,000 new apprenticeships to give young people choice in how they build their careers.

We want to support and help develop Irish business and entrepreneurs.

A prosperous economy is central to any effort to create a decent society.

But prosperity, by itself, won't create that decent society.

We must manage the economy to serve the needs of the community.

Ensuring a decent standard of living for workers is essential.

So over the lifetime of the next government, we'll work to raise the minimum wage to a living wage.

And we'll continue our reform of the tax system to make it fairer.

We'll start by abolishing USC on the first €72,000 of individual income.

We'll do that because, after the crisis we've come through, low and middle-income workers need more take-home pay.

We'll ensure the wealthiest in society continue to pay their fair share.

Our fair tax plan means the bulk of available resources can go towards the services essential for a decent society.

For every €1 in tax reductions, €3 will be invested in the services that our families and communities need.

Good schools for our children.

Better healthcare in the community.

Pension improvements to support our older people.

And parks and amenities that we can all enjoy.

This is how Labour will stand up for families and communities.

We'll start with housing, by speeding up the supply of affordable family homes.

We'll establish a 'Save to Buy' scheme to give first-time buyers a helping hand.

This will give them a cash top-up when saving the deposit for a home.

And Alan Kelly will chop waiting lists by building high-quality social houses for those who need them.

Labour believes a good education is every child's birthright.

In Government, we're already reducing the ratio of pupils to teachers in each class.

And we've delivered the first improvements to reading and maths levels in a generation.

In the lifetime of the next Government, we'll deliver the smallest class sizes in the history of the State.

And for parents with young children, Labour has a radical but affordable plan to reduce the cost of childcare over the next five years to €2 an hour.

So every child has the best possible start in life.

Delivering quality health care to every person who needs it is a huge challenge.

We'll ensure more people receive the care they need in their own communities through a national network of primary care centres.

That will take pressure off our hospitals.

We've already ensured that free GP care is a reality for every child under six and every adult over 70.

Our plan is to extend free GP care to everyone, so that families will never again have to worry about the cost of going to the doctor.

We want to empower people with disabilities to live as full participants in society.

This includes the world of work.

Our strategy aims to ensure that people with disabilities, who can and want to work, are supported and enabled to do so.

During the crash, older people sacrificed a lot, in ways never fully appreciated.

Helping their sons or daughters to keep a roof over their heads or food on the table.

That was why I protected the State pension through the worst of times, and increased it as soon as we had the money to do so.

Labour will use the strong economy to annually increase the pension by at least €5 a week.

It's the very least our older people deserve.

It's another step towards the decent society at the heart of Labour's vision.

Ireland's contribution to the world in terms of arts and culture stands way out of proportion to our size.

I believe public endowment of the arts is returned many times over.

That's why Labour in Government will double the funding for the Arts Council and Film Board over the next five years.

I started by talking about journeys.

The journey of the last eight years has been a truly testing one for our people.

We were knocked down, but we picked ourselves back up.

We regrouped, rebuilt and redefined.

We will rightly commemorate 1916 this year with our economic freedom restored.

If we stay on the right course, we can sustain the recovery and strengthen the economy.

If we stay on the right course, we can use the strong economy to build a decent society.

If you want Ireland to stay on that course, it means giving Labour the mandate to finish what we started.

So I'm asking you tonight, in the election, to vote Labour Number 1.

Return Labour to government to provide continued stability.

To deliver the right balance of economic and social progress.

We'll stand up for workers, families and communities.

We'll stand up for a modern Ireland.

We'll stand up for Ireland's future.

And seize the decade of opportunity that is ahead of us.

Together, we've made a good start.

A good start is half the work.

So let's complete the journey.