

TAKING IRELAND FORWARD

Policy Ideas Paper



LEO
Varadkar

COURAGE
TO TAKE US
FORWARD



FINE GAEL



FOREWORD

Ireland stands at a crossroads. The economic collapse, driven by factors both domestic and international, required strong and decisive government. We are now emerging from what has been a lost decade for many of our people. Now we require new ambition to respond to the challenges that have built up, to meet the hopes, aspirations and needs of all our people.

Ireland needs new leadership to take us forward.

I joined Fine Gael when I was seventeen years old, not because anyone encouraged me, but because I was inspired by its vision for Ireland and its unshakeable integrity when it came to how politics should operate. I am still inspired by these values. I believe Fine Gael can articulate a message that will resonate and inspire. It can also be popular, and prove that a political message can be successful without any of the crude populism that has tainted politics in some countries around the world. Fine Gael should be a party that can attract votes in Castleknock and Clondalkin, Dungarvan and Doohoma, not because we are all things to all people but because there are people in all areas and all walks of life who share our values.

At this juncture in our history, as our country faces a series of difficult challenges both internal and external, I believe that I can offer a new kind of leadership, and help navigate a new way forward for Fine Gael and Ireland. I have the courage to take us forward as a party and country but I can only do it with your help and support.

Courage To Take Us Forward

LEO VARADKAR

FINE GAEL - RENEWING OUR VALUES

Fine Gael is the party for people who are ambitious for Ireland, for their family and community, and for themselves personally. We are a party with values deeply rooted in our history and focused on the future.

Fine Gael's values form the foreword to our Constitution and Rules and are emblazoned on the wall of our Parliamentary Party room. I want to renew and expand them.

Building on its existing values, Fine Gael is the party of:

- **Hope and Ambition** – We believe in an Ireland of excellence and ambition. We want to build a country where people are confident they will be better off next year, that their communities will grow stronger and develop, and that their children will have greater opportunities. This can only be achieved by a government that harnesses this ambition.
- **Equality of Opportunity** – We believe that everyone should have an equal chance to achieve their full potential through education, equal rights before the law, employment opportunities and a social welfare system that is a strong safety net and a second chance but not a way of life. We take equal opportunity seriously, and believe that individuals have the right to pursue their dreams and seek new opportunities. Freedom, personal ambition and innovation should be fostered, rather than stifled by Government.
- **Reward** – We believe in rewarding work, innovation and talent. We believe in lower tax rates on income so that people can keep more of their own money. They know best how to use it. We also believe other forms of work that are not paid, like caring, should be rewarded and supported by the State.
- **Enterprise** – We believe the role of Government is to provide infrastructure and foster an environment that enables businesses to grow and prosper. This creates jobs, wealth and prosperity.





- **Security** – Fine Gael is the party of law and order. We believe that laws should be respected. We make no excuses for crime. We understand that true security can only be achieved when effective policing is combined with tackling the factors that contribute to crime and by supporting families and nurturing communities.

I stand by these values and I believe that they need to be added to. Democracy, the European Union, internationalism and personal liberty cannot be taken for granted. We must affirm these ideals and fight for them.

More and more, politics is less about left versus right, and more about open versus closed. Namely, those who are open to the world, believe on balance that globalisation, free trade and managed migration are good things and that people should be free to live their lives as they see fit; and those who hark back to nationalism, protectionism and State control over the economy and people's lives. Fine Gael knows where it stands on this emerging political division domestically and internationally. We stand for the future.

So, I propose to add four new values. These are:

- **Personal Liberty** – Fine Gael believes that individuals and families know how best to organise their own lives and make decisions for themselves. The role of Government is to protect people's freedoms and privacy and to intervene through its laws where necessary to protect the public good.
- **Europe & Openness** – Fine Gael is a party of Europe. We believe that Ireland's future lies at the heart of

Europe, a common home we are helping to build. Europe needs to change. We will seek to build a Citizen's Europe that focuses on dealing with big transnational issues better and devolves more autonomy back to member states and municipalities. We will work for a Europe that is more democratic.

We believe in global free trade, greater freedom, fewer borders and barriers. We believe that managed migration enriches our society and benefits our economy. We feel a special connection with the Irish diaspora who are part of our nation and will bring them closer.

- **The Environment** – Our environment is under threat from global challenges like climate change and local issues such as bad planning. Protection of our environment and building sustainable communities for our families should influence all policies, especially planning, water, energy, transport and housing.
- **Compassion** – We are a compassionate party that affirms the role of the State in offering a helping hand to those that need it.

These values shall describe our vision as a party and will guide our policies as a party in the years to come.

POLICY IDEAS TO TAKE US FORWARD

To take Ireland forward, I propose a number of ideas for change. These are not the entire sum of what we will do. Rather, they are chosen to illustrate the direction I believe we need to take. These policy ideas and proposals derive from Fine Gael's values.

The Programme for Partnership Government and the Fine Gael/Fianna Fáil Confidence and Supply Agreement, both of which I was involved in negotiating and am committed to, remain paramount. These ideas set out a longer-term vision for the future of our country. Some can be implemented by this Government and others will frame the mandate we will seek for future Fine Gael led governments.

I. A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT

DEVELOPING THE SOCIAL INSURANCE SYSTEM

Rather than abolishing the Universal Social Charge (USC) outright, we will merge the USC and PRSI into a new single Social Insurance payment.

As part of a wide-ranging reform of social insurance, we will improve and extend existing contributory benefits such as parental leave. We will restore bereavement benefit and redundancy payments and introduce new benefits including refunds for more medical and treatment-related expenses reimbursing some of the cost of a doctor, dentist or health care professional visit, as well as the cost of medicines.

We strongly support the social insurance system and the contributory principle underpinning it. Employees and self-employed people pay in through PRSI and in return receive benefits when they need them. There are no means tests, everyone who contributes benefits, for example, during periods of unemployment or illness, maternity/paternity, on retirement or if a person pre-deceases their dependents. We want to develop this.

INCOME INEQUALITY AND POVERTY

We will make it a signature target of Government to reduce consistent poverty rates to pre-crisis levels and then lower. We will do the same for child poverty. This will require a holistic set of actions comprising employment opportunities, education, wages, welfare and

affordable access to public services. As a first step we will extend the fuel allowance in the next budget. The Taoiseach will report annually to the Dáil on progress each year.

FAMILIES

We will support all families. We will extend maternity and paternity leave and will allow couples to share it. We will provide financial support for families who need to avail of fertility treatment.

We will continue to make childcare more affordable for more people. We will increase the Homemakers Tax credit to recognise those parents who chose to stay at home.

FREE EDUCATION

We will restore free education in our schools by increasing the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance by 50% in two years, reducing the cost to parents of school transport and setting a cap on what can be requested as a voluntary contribution. Alongside the implementation of the Action Plan for Education, we will provide subsidised school books/tablets to all children and extend the School Breakfast Programme to more schools every year.

A CITIZENS IRELAND

Ireland is changing rapidly. Citizens have new expectations and the State needs to respond. Citizens often find a state that is not set up to make it easier for the citizen: to get information, to access services in a convenient manner, to get a response to complaints. We will aim to promote more voice and choice for citizens, and make it easier for individuals and families to navigate services.



II. AN AMBITIOUS AND EXPANSIONARY ECONOMIC POLICY

SENSIBLE BUDGETARY POLICY

A prudent budgetary policy will be central to our approach. We can and should be ambitious for the future but we will build on solid foundations. The sacrifices of recent years must not be in vain. Unsustainable borrowing would hurt the vulnerable the most in the long-term. We need, as planned, to eliminate the current budget deficit and deliver on our commitment to low borrowing in a volatile world. It is essential to keep our national finances sound and secure.

A strong economy can support the development of a fair and just society. The tax revenues produced by a strongly growing economy will enable us to:

- Build the transport infrastructure and provide the services to make it easier for people to get to and from work every day;
- Support the quality childcare services which will make life a little easier for families;
- Provide the investment in healthcare that is so badly needed, for people and families at all stages of their lives;
- Deliver an education system that can be the best in Europe at ending cycles of disadvantage and providing the skills that our young people need.

FULL EMPLOYMENT AND GOOD JOBS

We will aim for full employment; that is a job for everyone who wants one, by 2019.

At the heart of a successful economy must be a strong enterprise sector whose success is built on innovation, exports, entrepreneurship and competitiveness. In the face of the new challenges to our traditional model as a gateway to Europe, we must accelerate our efforts to build an indigenous engine of economic growth:

- Building stronger hubs of innovation and entrepreneurship;

- Developing sustainable enterprise strategies for our regions;
- Diversifying our penetration of new markets with innovative products and services;
- Moving rapidly to exploit new technologies that are transforming most sectors.

We will ensure that the quality of employment continues to improve by enhancing employment rights, pensions and pay. Employment, in particular quality, secure and well-paid employment, is the best way to achieve financial security and prosperity for our citizens.

We must acknowledge that technology is changing economic models radically and we must guard against casual work with poor prospects becoming a new norm. As technology transforms markets, new concepts to protect standards for citizens and workers must evolve.

TEN YEAR CAPITAL PLAN FOR A CHANGING IRELAND

We will substantially increase capital spending above what is planned already through a new ten year National Development Plan.

Ireland's infrastructure lags behind other European countries. This applies to housing, roads and public transport, broadband, healthcare, water, ICT, schools and further education. Advances are being made but we are not investing enough and are not planning far enough ahead. This investment will be coordinated with the new national planning framework.

We will amend our National Debt Target to 55 % (from 45%) of GDP, which is within existing EU rules, to allow greater capital investment. We will lead an effort in Europe to allow for greater spending on infrastructure and to restore the 'golden rule' that treats borrowing for investment in capital differently to day to day current spending.

The new capital plan will allow us to bring forward long delayed projects like Dublin Metro, the M20 between Cork and Limerick, motorway access to the West and North-West and major investment in our healthcare and educational institutions. It will also enable further investment to tackle our housing needs.



As we move towards balanced and planned development, we must build sustainable cities with better integration of housing, transport and amenities infrastructure.

INCOME TAX & TALENT

We will reduce our high marginal rates of income tax to bring us into line with our competitors in order to attract and retain professional talent. The marginal tax rate is too high and people start paying it at incomes that are far too modest. It discourages people from working extra hours, doing overtime or seeking a promotion. Nobody should pay more than 50% in income tax and social insurance on any euro they earn. The self-employed should have tax equality.

For decades, a cornerstone of our industrial policy has been attracting corporations to Ireland with low taxes on corporate profits. This shall not change. However we believe that the next few decades will be characterised by global competition for human talent more than corporations. We need to take steps to support and attract the best and the brightest people to Ireland, as well as encouraging the talent of those already here. As part of our plan to retain and attract talent we will make our cities, towns and rural areas more attractive places to live.

We will, as budgetary circumstances allow, reduce DIRT to encourage people to save and Capital Gains Tax (CGT) to encourage enterprise and greater turnover in the property market.

PUBLIC SECTOR PAY

We believe that negotiations to extend the Lansdowne Road Agreement should not focus solely on pay restoration or working hours. Our focus must also be on public service improvements, on meeting the needs of all citizens in a changing Ireland. It must also be an opportunity to secure public sector pensions on a more sustainable footing and achieve further modernisation of the public services for those who depend on them and those who work in them.

We accept that our public service now operate in a changing labour market, we therefore support the need for international salary and workplace comparisons for public service employees who work in international labour markets.

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AND PEACE

We will legislate to make Labour Court recommendations binding on employers and unions in essential public and security services as determined by the Oireachtas. People should no longer be inconvenienced by strike action in essential services. The Labour Court will be the final arbiter and will ensure that workers receive a fair response to any claim. This will not impinge on the right to strike until a Labour Court determination is made.

III. GLOBAL IRELAND

EUROPE & BREXIT

The British decision to leave the European Union is a defining moment for our country and its relationship with the rest of the world. It was not a decision of Ireland or the European Union but it will have a major impact on many facets of Irish life.

We will capitalise on the opportunities that arise in financial services, inward investment, trade and the relocation of European agencies. We will work to minimise the impact on trade and travel between Britain and Ireland and on the island of Ireland. We will build new alliances in the new Europe to defend and protect our interests. We will maintain the strongest and warmest relations possible with Britain but will not allow that bilateral relationship to frame our relationship with the European Union.

Five principles underlie our approach to Brexit:

- (1) Protecting the long standing common citizenship that allows Irish and British citizens to reside, work, study and access social security and public services in each other's countries as though they were citizens of both.
- (2) Ensuring that the border remains invisible. To do so, we will advocate special arrangements for Northern Ireland which respect the democratic vote of people living in the North. We will argue for Northern Ireland to remain in the Single Market, Common Agricultural Policy, Interreg, Erasmus and other programmes.
- (3) We will seek a Free Trade Agreement between the European Union and the United Kingdom. This would protect trade, our enterprises and agriculture.
- (4) We will learn from the results of the Brexit referendum. We will counteract rising nationalism and Euroscepticism by working for a Citizens' Europe that is more democratic, devolves more competencies back to member states and municipalities and promotes economic growth and employment.
- (5) We will seize the opportunities that arise from Brexit to support our businesses and farming sector to become more competitive and diversify the markets they serve. An Enterprise and Farming Stabilisation and Transition Fund will be established to support businesses and farms in making the transition to the new post-Brexit trading environment.

We will build on the civic engagement carried out to date to ensure that the ideas of those outside Government and the political system generally have the opportunity to be heard

and taken into consideration in the development of policy. To tap into the expert advice available outside Government the model of the Scottish First Minister's Standing Committee on Europe will be adapted for use in Ireland.

BRINGING IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND CLOSER TOGETHER

We need to prepare for the possibility that a United Ireland or shared sovereignty will occur in our lifetime.

However, before we have territorial unity, we must have unity among people. **Real lasting workable unity can only come about with support from both communities.** So we oppose a 'border poll' at this time.

Twenty years after the Good Friday Agreement we need to explore how we can co-operate more fully on this island and between these islands to the benefit of all their peoples. Progress has been made in recent years but more can and should be done.

We also need to complete the unfinished business from the various agreements reached since 1998 and work together to find pragmatic ways to progress these matters to a conclusion.

OUR GLOBAL PRESENCE

In an ever more competitive world we need to ensure that our presence is felt if we are to win our share of the trade, employment and investment opportunities that are out there. We will double Ireland's global footprint over a period of seven years through new and augmented diplomatic missions and agency (IDA, Enterprise Ireland, Tourism Ireland) presence overseas.

The Government will be empowered to appoint Special Ambassadors for issues like human rights, women's rights and climate change.

THE DIASPORA

We will reach out to our diaspora and the global Irish nation.

We will establish new student visas, bursaries and a student holiday visa (similar to the J1) for young people of Irish descent. This will help to ensure that the bond continues down the generations.

We will campaign for a constitutional change that will allow Irish citizens living in other countries to vote in Presidential elections so that the Presidency becomes an institution for the Irish nation, as well as the Irish State. As an initial reform to the Seanad, a number of Senators will be elected to a new Global Ireland panel/constituency.

To coincide with Brexit, the charge for UK citizens resident in Ireland who are entitled to Irish citizenship will be reduced to a nominal fee for a period of time.

THE ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE ACTION

We will make Ireland a global leader in GreenTech, dramatically increase our production of renewable energy in consultation with local communities, incentivise the purchase of electric vehicles and hybrids and double investment in our greenways and cycling facilities.

We will extend the suite of REFIT tariffs that guarantee a minimum price for renewable energy (e.g. microgeneration, offshore wind, solar). We will also support bus and rail companies to move away from diesel as a fuel.

MAKING IRELAND A CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT INTO TRANSFORMATIVE TECHNOLOGIES

We have made great progress in recent years in attracting companies involved in transformative technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, nanotech and advanced manufacturing. We can now carry this forward to a new level and make Ireland a leading centre for research and development into transformative technologies.

IV. FAIR PLAY FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR

NEW DEAL FOR THE SELF-EMPLOYED

We will complete the 'new deal' for the self-employed by equalising tax credits and rates, scrapping the USC super levy and extending a form of unemployment insurance (Jobseekers benefit) to them.

PENSION PROMISE

We will index increases in the State Pension to the cost of living as an automatic minimum increase every year Nobody should fear poverty in retirement. This will ensure that this fear is conquered.

Only 35% of people in the private sector have an occupational pension, the rest rely on the state pension alone. We have to deal with this situation. We will automatically enrol workers under 60 into a personal pension savings account (MySaver).

Contributions will be made by employees and employers with a bonus from the State similar to the SSIA. This will achieve universal pension coverage and will ensure that everyone has a personal pension on top of their state pension. There will be an opt-out option for employees who want to and an opt-in option for the self-employed, homemakers, carers and others. Parents will be able to start an account for their children. It will be possible to dip into the account for further education and for the purchase of a first home.

To get people started and to encourage them to pay in, a proportion of proceeds of the sale of shares in the



nationalised banks will be put into their individual MySaver accounts.

V. A CATCH-UP PLAN FOR THE IRELAND LEFT BEHIND

Ireland's economic recovery is real, growth is happening and unemployment is falling in all regions. We must ensure that the recovery is spread evenly across the country and that rural communities benefit as part of the new, broadly based economy, which is based on enterprise and innovation.

BALANCED REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

We will prepare and publish a new National Spatial Strategy for Ireland which will provide a framework for an Ireland of six million people. A key element of this will be ensuring that most population growth occurs outside of the Greater Dublin Area in our regional cities. It will focus on developing our county and market towns as attractive places to live and run a business. The new Spatial Strategy will be consistent with the new National Development Plan and the enhanced capital budget will be a driver for this.

RURAL IRELAND

Rural Ireland faces a series of difficulties – poor transport infrastructure, poor broadband, a tendency for employment to become increasingly located in urban areas and the decline of traditional enterprises leading to a loss of talented people through emigration. Centralisation has also led to a loss of services in smaller communities.

Technological developments, allied to determined Government policy, can lead to a renewal of rural areas. We will harness the untapped potential of rural Ireland by implementing the Action Plan for Rural Ireland. Particularly focusing on broadband provision, investment in regional and local roads (including community and local improvement schemes) and increased supports for job creation, including more FDI in the regions.

Essential local services such as rural schools and rural GP services need to be protected and ways found to enhance

the contribution they make through the use of new technologies. The revitalisation of rural towns which are still suffering the after effects of the economic downturn will be prioritised through increased funding for the Town and Village Renewal Scheme and a suite of measures to increase residential occupancy in towns and counteract town centre decline.

A network of Creative and Enterprise hubs will be developed across the country, with a specific focus on rural communities.

Tourism is a key driver of economic activity and the target of increasing visitor numbers to rural areas by 2019 will be achieved.

The 1916 Centenary celebrations shone a light on the remarkable community spirit that is the hallmark of towns and villages nationwide. Our approach to rural Ireland will be based on working in partnership with local communities; local voices will be heard and respected because we believe change can be driven from the grassroots up.

URBAN DEPRIVATION

It is also the case that there are many areas of great deprivation in urban areas that have been left behind. There should be a dedicated 'urbanism fund' to improve the public realm in such areas in respect of parks and amenities.

AGRICULTURE / MARINE

In the negotiations on Brexit, we will put the unique difficulties of the agriculture and food sector top of the agenda and ensure that arrangements and policies are put in place to counteract the potential impact on food exports to the UK. This can best be done by an EU-Britain Free Trade Agreement. Alongside the negotiations on the Common Agricultural Policy post-2020, we will prioritise the protection of the Basic Payments Scheme and agri-environmental schemes which are crucial to the incomes of farmers.

We will also ensure that farmers and the food industry can capitalise on Ireland's natural advantage as a grass-based producer of food with a low carbon footprint thereby ensuring that the ambitious targets set out in Food Wise 2025 are achieved.

Fine Gael in Government published the first ever blueprint for the marine sector, Harnessing Our Ocean Wealth (HOOW). It makes clear our ambitions for the sector: to double the value of the blue economy by 2030 and deliver 29,000 additional jobs across the various maritime sectors. We need to build on the work already in train to ensure the achievement of these ambitions.

VI. BUILDING A BETTER SOCIETY

EDUCATION

Education is pivotal to the realisation of the sort of Ireland that we want to see, one where:

- We can excel in enterprise, science, innovation, culture and public service;
- We can break down barriers that leave people caught in the margins by building pathways to fulfilling individual potential and lifting communities;
- We can nurture discerning and resilient citizens respecting and encouraging diversity, building strong and sustainable communities.

We will aspire to have the best education and training service in Europe within a decade, including:

- Having the best learning environment with subject choices and teaching approaches to match;
- Being best at creating education pathways for people who come to education at a disadvantage or with special educational needs;
- Encouraging education institutions themselves to be learning organisations innovating and building bridges to the wider world of enterprise, public service and community;
- Making Physical Education an exam subject option for the Leaving Certificate.

HOUSING

We will continue to implement Rebuilding Ireland and go further as conditions develop in the sector. The First Time Buyer' Scheme will be phased out if the review

finds it has had an inflationary effect on property prices. The money saved will be used to fund the construction of 'Housing with Care' for older people to incentivise retired people to move out of large homes. We will impose a weighting on the Local Property Tax (LPT) on properties that are habitable but unoccupied for more than two years in areas of high housing demand.

We will encourage property owners to re-enter the rental market by treating renting as a normal business when it comes to tax relief and deductions.

JUSTICE

Our priority is protecting our citizens by reducing crime. We will do this through further investment in An Garda Síochána, the creation of a more efficient legal system and a tough sentencing approach to consistent and dangerous offenders.

Our society owes a debt of gratitude to the men and women of An Garda Síochána for the work they do in protecting us. We however recognise that confidence in the Force has been damaged by recent events and we will ensure that all necessary steps are taken to restore it. In making changes we will be guided by the recommendations of the new Commission on Policing.

We believe that immigration is good for Ireland on balance. We will facilitate immigration which unites families, meets our international and humanitarian obligations, staffs vital public services and supports our economy. We will take a robust approach to tackling illegal migration and abuses of freedom of movement within the EU. We will do this through implementation of the new enforcement provisions in the recently enacted International Protection Act.

HEALTH

The Oireachtas Committee on the Future of Healthcare is currently developing a long-term vision for healthcare and the direction of health policy. It is essential that the report of the Committee be considered promptly by Government and a meaningful response be put forward for consideration by the Oireachtas.

The health service of the future needs to be patient centred and about better access and outcomes for patients. This will involve the further expansion and development of primary and social care, reformed structures, ICT and financial systems, sufficient capacity to satisfy unmet demand and a vigorous public health agenda.

HEALTHY IRELAND

The Healthy Ireland programme will be developed into a new State agency responsible for promoting personal and public health & wellbeing with a ring-fenced budget to do so. Irish people should be among the healthiest in the world but as a nation we have a long way to go.



DISABILITY

We will ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities this year. Resources will be prioritised to make respite care more available so families and carers can take a break. Greater provision will be made for new community houses for people with disabilities currently living with ageing parents who can no longer care for them.

WATER

We support metering and charging for excessive use of treated water. The Joint Committee on the Future Funding of Domestic Water Services has given us a route map. We believe in an outcome that is honest and fair to the taxpayer and within the commitments of the water framework directive. People who obeyed the law and paid their water charges should now be reimbursed so that they are not disadvantaged relative to those who did not. This should be done as soon as possible.

TRANSPORT

We will increase subvention of public transport and rural transport to encourage more people to use it.

We will progressively open up more public transport routes to tender to ensure better value, higher quality and more frequent services. We will complete the electronic ticketing project.

We will establish a Commission on Congestion to report on possible solutions for worsening congestion in our major cities like Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway. This may include greater devolution of transport responsibility to reformed local authorities, and scrutiny of solutions which have been applied elsewhere, such as the use of smart technology. The recommendations of this Commission will be incorporated within the new National Development Plan.

More dedicated off-road cycleways will be developed in urban areas and school cycling programmes will be supported and extended.

AN GHAEILGE

Tá an Ghaeilge lárnach dár bhféiniúlacht agus ní mór tacú go láidir léi. Tá sé riachtanach go dtabharfar faoi líon na gcainteoirí Gaeilge a mhéadú agus go mbeidh sé mar thoradh ar ár mbeartais go mbeidh an teanga le feiceáil agus le cluinstitín in úsáid go laethúil ar fud na tíre.

Má thoghtar mise i mo Thaoiseach beidh mé ag úsáid na Gaeilge go laethúil i mo chuid oibre.

Tacaím le Straitéis Fiche Bliain don Ghaeilge a chur i bhfeidhm. Beidh mé ag obair chun na gníomhaíochtaí cuí in earnáil an oideachais, na n-ealaíon, an chultúir agus i seirbhísí a éascú agus tuigim an tábhacht atá le hacmhainní a chur ar fáil chun aidhmeanna na Straitéise a bhaint amach.

Aithním freisin na riachtanais ar leith atá ag na pobail Ghaeltachta agus beidh mé ag obair ar son aitheantas agus meas do chearta Gaeilgeoirí. Cuirfear i bhfeidhm fosta an

bheartas rithábhachtach mar atá an Comhbheartas Oideachas Gaeltachta. Déanfar leasuithe substaintiúla ar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla agus déanfar cainteoirí líofa Gaeilge a earcú sa tSeirbhís Phoiblí le cinntiú go gcuirfear seirbhís ar fáil trí Ghaeilge.

Beidh muid réamhghníomhach chun Gaelscoileanna, Gaelcholáistí agus aonaid nua a bhunú chun freastal ar an mhéadú leanúnach ar oideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge.

ARTS, CULTURE & SPORT

We will double the Government budget for arts, culture and sport over seven years. These areas enrich our lives, keep us healthy physically and mentally and help define us and make us proud as a nation. We will embark on an extensive investment programme in our National Cultural Institutions, including our National Theatre. These National Cultural Institutions will be mandated to take more of their work on tour to local and county museums and arts centres.

We will resource the delivery of the key aims articulated in the Creative Ireland programme. In recognition of the hugely positive impact engaging in the arts has on our children; we will prioritise increased funding for enhanced arts in education provision through the formal and non-formal education sector and we will develop a national network of instrument banks. We will also seek to significantly grow Ireland's audio visual sector with a strategy to attract more international productions to Ireland and resource greater domestic output.

We will create more sporting and artists bursaries to financially support emerging sportspersons and artists. Ireland should aim to match New Zealand's haul of Olympic medals per capita through development of the National Sport Campus and High Performance programme.

We will pursue with vigour our Rugby World Cup bid for 2023.

VII. MODERNISING GOVERNMENT

REFORM OF GOVERNMENT

We will move to European cabinet style of Government with Ministers empowered to include among their staff and Management Board more external expertise and capacity. We will enhance the movement of individuals between the public and private sectors to the benefit of both. We also look to bring specialists in particular functions such as IT, accounting, communications and economics into the public service to strengthen it.

The Electoral Act will be amended to provide for more flexibility to allow greater respect for county boundaries when drawing constituency ones.

The Leader of the Seanad will attend the pre-Cabinet meeting of FG Ministers and may be called to attend Cabinet to discuss issues related to the Seanad.

The Cabinet will have three special full-day meetings per year to consider solutions to long-term problems and strategic issues (e.g. foreign policy, Northern Ireland, social and economic equality, climate change). Too little attention is given by Cabinet to forward and long-term thinking as Cabinet currently only meets for 2-3 hours to deal with a long agenda of current and pressing issues. At least one of these meetings will be held outside Dublin.

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

We will continue the positive work of the last six years in terms of freedom of information, the regulation of lobbying and the commitment of government to open data. Transparency in decision-making and accountability from those in positions of power is essential to good decision making and to public confidence in our system of government.

REAL MULTI-ANNUAL BUDGETING

We will move decisively to a three-year budget with expenditure ceilings, tax and welfare changes set out three years in advance. The set piece annual budget is archaic. While adjustments will be necessary from time to time, it will give all stakeholders – individuals, businesses, government departments and agencies greater certainty and more capacity to plan ahead.

REAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT

We will establish a Commission on Local Government to report within a year on the reform and empowerment of local councils. At least one third of the members shall be serving councillors.

Among the matters to be considered will be:

- Greater autonomy over the Local Property Tax and Commercial Rates;
- The replacement of commercial rates with a commercial property tax similar to the Local Property Tax;
- The transfer of executive functions from the Chief Executives to the Mayor/Cathaoirleach to establish a Secretary-General/Minister style balance of authority;
- Plebiscites to restore or create and fund Town and District Councils in places that may want them;
- A Cabinet system of control in Councils;
- Greater involvement by elected members in interview panels for the appointment of Chief Executives and directors of services; and

- Remuneration and supports for councillors.

There will be a Local Election Boundary Commission which will be mandated to create smaller electoral districts more closely connected to geographical communities, natural boundaries and parishes.

THE CONSTITUTION

Following the Citizens Assembly deliberations on abortion an All Party Committee will now consider the matter. Once the Committee has concluded its work and the Oireachtas has debated that outcome a final proposal should be put in a referendum in 2018 so that the people can have their say.

Abortion is a matter of sincerely held and different views within society and Fine Gael. It is essential that the debate ahead is conducted in a manner respectful of these different points of view. There will be no three line whip on this issue.

Arising from the work of the Convention on the Constitution 2012-2014 and the current Citizen's Assembly other matters, such as the position of women in the home, may need to be the subject of proposed constitutional amendments and it would be intended to use the opportunity of the next Presidential and/or Local/European Elections to do this.

AUTONOMY FOR UNIVERSITIES AND STATE-OWNED ENTERPRISES

We will begin the process of restoring autonomy to these bodies and their governing boards where more than half of their income does not come from the Exchequer. This autonomy has been steadily eroded in the past decade to their detriment.

REGULATION OVERHAUL

We will establish an independent commission to examine the body of regulation that applies to business and agriculture when it comes to health & safety, information obligations, the environment, heritage and building to establish which ones are justified on an evidence-basis, in which cases EU-regulations have been 'gold-plated' without good reason and carry out a cost-benefit analysis on them. This can inform the government on how such regulations can be overhauled to reduce costs and barriers to business without undermining their stated purpose.

