

Positive

Strong Leadership

Simon
COVENEY

FINE GAEL 

**Uniting
Ireland**

Introduction

In five years' time Ireland will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Irish state. As the party which created that state, I believe that Fine Gael is ideally placed to offer up a new vision for Ireland as we respond to the challenges posed by Brexit, the rising tide of populism across the globe and a growing but ageing population at home. A new vision which is built around one simple proposition - we are all stronger united.

“ We seek office to work towards a society in which freedom and equality are not concepts from an academic textbook but are expressed in real and tangible conditions which all our people can enjoy. ”

(Fine Gael Manifesto, *Towards a Just Society*, 1965).

Fine Gael has always been a party of clear vision and big ideas, whether it is the Just Society of Declan Costello or the Constitutional Crusade by Garret Fitzgerald. For both men the goal of politics was to build a society in which all of our people could reach their full potential, and no one was left behind. It is a vision of Ireland which I share and a political legacy which I am determined to build upon.

At a time of deep scepticism about politics in Ireland and elsewhere, I believe it is incumbent upon every democratic representative to declare what they stand for and to undertake the hard work of delivering real change. It is why I asked to lead Fine Gael's referendum campaign in favour of marriage equality. It is also why I asked to become Minister for Housing. And it is why I am running for the leadership of Fine Gael.

While I am fundamentally optimistic about the future of Ireland, and am convinced that our best days lie ahead of us, I also understand the anger of many who feel that they have been left behind. For despite the very real progress we have made since the days of Costello and Fitzgerald, we remain a country with deep geographical and societal divisions. Our political system has in turn fractured into a range of new parties and alliances, each of which represents only a narrow section of our population.

Some have argued that Fine Gael should follow suit. That we too should focus on our core vote and retreat back to the comfort zone of narrow tribal and ideological politics. I disagree. I believe passionately that Fine Gael must reach out to all of our citizens. That we should be a party for everyone which seeks to unite rather than divide. Our goal should be nothing less than the creation of a society in which everyone can participate, and an economy from which everyone can benefit.

Looking to the Future

But if we are to create the kind of Ireland to which Costello and Fitzgerald aspired, and which we would want our children to live in, we need to do three things:

- Set out a clear reform agenda for the Fine Gael party, drawing on the lessons we learned from the last General Election.
- Modernise Government to make it much more effective at delivering ambitious policy goals; and
- Deliver a clear vision for transforming Ireland into a country in which every person has the opportunity to reach his or her full potential.

A New Fine Gael to Drive Change in Ireland

In 2016 Fine Gael was returned to Government for the first time since the 1920s. While this was a truly historic result it is also the case that our vote fell significantly compared to the election of 2011. Since the 2016 election two reviews of our performance have been undertaken, both of which emphasise the need for significant change in how Fine Gael organises itself. The detailed report by Marion Coy, in particular, points to the failures at the last election and makes numerous recommendations to correct these failings. If elected as leader of the party I will publish a detailed plan, before the Ard Fheis in November of this year, to show how we will implement those key recommendations in these reviews.

My vision for the party is simple. I want Fine Gael to enter the next election as the party with the most positive message, the biggest ideas, the clearest vision and the most effective campaigning machine. I want a party in which everyone - members of the Parliamentary Party, councilors and party members - has a voice and that voice is listened to.

Reforming Government to Deliver Better Outcomes

My experience as a Minister has made one thing very clear. The institutions of state are not strong enough at policy implementation. Reports are issued and legislation passed but, all too often, insufficient action is taken.

In order to change this I am of the very strong view that the Department of the Taoiseach should play a much more central role in long term strategic planning and delivery. If elected I propose to:

- Appoint a strong Chief of Staff to make sure that all parts of Government work much more effectively together to deliver for the people of Ireland;
- Establish a new Policy and Delivery Unit within the Taoiseach's office staffed with expertise from both inside and outside government. It will be responsible for, among other things, preparing a whole of Government Ireland 2040 Plan by the end of this year. This will set out our key ambitions for the country over the period up to 2040 with deliverable action points for the period 2018-2021.
- Put in place a Communications Team which will engage with the public around major policy developments in a much more positive and proactive way. I believe that the manner in which the 2016 Year of Commemoration was managed in this regard is a model of good practice.

I also propose to create a new Minister for Infrastructure who will oversee the Government's public investment plan as part of the Ireland 2040 planning framework.

Bringing People and Communities Together

In Section 2 of this document I have set out my vision for modernising and uniting Ireland. While it contains specific proposals it is important to note that it is an ideas framework rather than a detailed policy document; a compass rather than a roadmap. It builds on the Programme for Government and the stability which it provides but emphasises certain key priorities of my own. The overall goal is to deliver a Government which will:

- Be the greenest in the history of the state, even as it delivers the kind of strategic infrastructure and New Cities strategy which our increasing population requires.
- Reduce the burden of taxation on low and middle income families and introduce further measures to support our small and medium sized enterprises. SMEs are and will remain the principal driver of jobs growth in Ireland.
- Unite our people by better connecting all parts of the island; building stronger communities; and delivering public services which empower individuals and respect the need for separation of church and state in service delivery. I believe that the arts and education sectors also have a vital role to play in building shared values and ambitions.
- Resolutely defend the interests of vital national industries such as agriculture, fisheries and food during future Brexit opportunities, while also taking full advantage of the new opportunities which Brexit presents both at home and abroad.

I have set out my personal policy priorities below.

1. Rebuilding Trust

It is crucial that we deliver a series of measures to help rebuild trust between the state and the citizen, including the creation of a new Anti-Corruption and Transparency (“ACT”) Commission which will respond to whistle blowers and possible corruption much more energetically than is currently the case.

2. Post-Brexit Ireland: Building a Competitive Economy

This looks at how post-Brexit Ireland should maintain its competitiveness in key areas such as taxation, skills and education, and strategic infrastructure. In order to ensure that Ireland is tax competitive I favour reducing the overall marginal tax rate (including USC and PRSI) to below 50%, and to widening the tax bands so that people don't start paying the higher rate of tax at the current low level of €33,800. It is clear that our SME sector also requires additional support, particularly as it responds to the challenges posed by Brexit.

3. Rebalancing Ireland: A New National Plan, Bridging the Urban/Rural Divide

To start rebalancing Ireland I see the need for additional ring-fenced strategic capital funding of over the next two decades. That is why I am working on a new plan, Ireland 2040, which will set out a roadmap to achieve this. That plan identifies the key strategic investments that can help bring about that more balanced development. This additional spending will be designed to both boost growth and competitiveness, and unlock the growth potential of the regions as the total number of people on this island continues to grow. It also contains a number of proposed measures to fight climate change and promote long term sustainability.

I will establish a working group, to report by the end of the year, on how we can use green taxes to further our climate change agenda, taking into account my ambition to reduce the overall burden of tax..

4. New Cities and Stronger Communities

My goal is to make Dublin the most dynamic international capital city in Europe while targeting a doubling in the size of our other cities by 2040. I want to ensure that these cities have sufficient critical mass to act as effective counter balances to Dublin and that there is, in turn, real integration between the regional cities and their surrounding local areas. This area also looks at how Government can help support the creation of stronger and more resilient communities both within and outside our cities.

5. Empowering Citizens through World Class Public Services

I believe that our Public Services should be judged by two clear criteria. First, how well do they meet the immediate needs of the individual. Second, and as importantly, how successfully do they help empower the individual so that they can reach their full potential. This section provides a number of concrete examples of how I believe the state can reform public services to help create more empowered citizens in crucial areas such as education, health and social welfare.

6. A Reunified Ireland

I believe that Fine Gael, following the decision by the UK to leave the EU, should develop a positive economic and strategic case for the reunification of Ireland over time and within the EU. But reunification, if it is to happen, must be about more than unifying territory or winning 50% + 1 vote in some future border poll. Fine Gael has always been about uniting communities and people - North and South. That is the only way to truly unite our island.

7. Positive Leadership Abroad

I believe that Ireland, as the only English-speaking country committed to the EU, is in a unique position to help shape the debate about the future shape and direction of the Union. I am also convinced, as a former Minister for Defence, that Ireland can play a stronger role through the UN in areas such as peace keeping and the protection of migrants and other displaced people.

Planning for our Future

In putting this document together I have sought to address what I believe are Ireland's most significant challenges, both short and long term, and its major opportunities. In the short term Brexit undoubtedly represents our nation's most fundamental challenge – politically, economically and strategically. It will have a major impact on our trade, inward investment to Ireland and tax competitiveness. It is also raising profound questions about both the future direction of the EU and the future relationship between the two parts of Ireland.

But while the challenges of Brexit are clear, so too are the opportunities. Ireland, as the only English-speaking country committed to the EU, is in a unique position to both help shape the debate about its future and to become a destination of choice for international investment seeking to access the EU market. I am also of the strong view that now is the right time for Fine Gael, the United Ireland Party, to put forward a positive case for the reunification of Ireland over time within the EU.

But if we are to maximise the possible advantages of Brexit for Ireland, and limit the impact of any negative developments, we will have to defend our national interests as strongly as possible as negotiations proceed. I believe that my experience as both a Member of the European Parliament and a Minister for Agriculture may be of value in this regard. As a former MEP I have a very good understanding of how the institutions of the EU actually work in practice. As a former Minister for Agriculture I also have considerable experience negotiating complicated deals within a European context.

But even as we prepare for Brexit, much more needs to be done to rebuild trust between the state and the citizen. As part of this process I am publishing with this document a Bill to create a new Anti-Corruption and Transparency Commission. I am also proposing that we consider a major change in how Ireland organises its national security services, as part of major reform of the Gardaí and the defence forces.

Over the longer term, demographic change is perhaps Ireland's biggest challenge. My Department recently published Ireland 2040, a national planning framework which focuses on the challenges and opportunities confronting Ireland over the next twenty years. We know that there will be at least a million more of us in the South, while the number of people over 65 will double with major implications for demand on our housing, transport, pension and health services. The number of secondary students is also forecasted to increase until 2026, while the numbers of full time third level students is expected to grow until at least 2028.

While these numbers are daunting it is important to remember that demographic change also presents us with a major opportunity to grow our economy in a smarter, greener and more inclusive way. My New Cities Strategy, for instance, will deliver growth which is much more economically balanced. The Department of Education, under Richard Bruton, has also adopted a positive, forward looking approach. It's Action Plan for Education sets out how Ireland will both meet increased demand and create an education service which is the best in Europe by 2026. We also have a major opportunity, as we move on from the economic crisis of the last decade, to build a new consensus around the future delivery of health services and to adopt innovative new responses to Ireland's long term pension's challenge.

But delivering more and improved services to our citizens will not be enough. I want Ireland to adopt a much more ambitious approach to fighting climate change with a major electric car initiative. We also need to tackle some of the deep seated social inequalities which have been allowed to linger for decades. In particular, I want to ensure that all households have access to suitable employment. The rate of jobless household in Ireland has consistently been significantly higher than in other European countries, even during the boom years, and is a key factor in driving welfare dependency, social exclusion and child poverty rates. We cannot allow so many of our people to be left behind without the ability to participate fully in society.

1 Rebuilding Trust

The rise of populism across Europe suggests a growing distance between large numbers of citizens and the institutions of government. While we have not seen the same populist surge in Ireland it is clear that trust in established institutions has also declined sharply, aided by a perception that wrongdoing in state institutions is not treated with the seriousness it deserves.

Action

I am publishing a Bill to establish a new Anti-Corruption and Transparency Commission (“ACT”) on a permanent footing. The Chief Commissioner will be conferred with the full powers of a High Court judge to enhance and strengthen the ability to identify, bring to account and prosecute serious public sector corruption and wrong-doing. I want to make sure that individuals are both encouraged and empowered to come forward and report suspected wrongdoing.

Based on my experience as a former Minister for Defence, and having seen the many demands placed upon our security services, I have long been an advocate for a new policing and national security strategy. I believe that we should consider separating national security functions from those of policing as part of wider reforms of the Gard and the defence forces. I believe that we should also consider, looking at experience elsewhere and taking into account expert advice, the establishment of a new National Security Agency incorporating the national security functions currently undertaken by both the police and defence forces.

2 Post-Brexit Ireland: Building a Competitive Economy

In the short term, Brexit represents our nation’s most fundamental challenge – and potentially its greatest opportunity provided that we focus on three priority areas:

- 1 **Tax Competitiveness;**
- 2 **Skills and Education; and**
- 3 **Strategic Infrastructure.**

Tax Competitiveness

In a recent report the National Competitiveness Council (NCC), has emphasised the vital need for Ireland to protect its competitiveness in a post-Brexit world. Ireland it noted:

“faces unique competitiveness challenges given the nature of our deep and longstanding economic relationship with the UK...

Enhancing competitiveness requires an increased focus on Ireland’s macroeconomic environment and microeconomic structural factors such as innovation capacity, market diversification, infrastructure, costs of doing business and productivity.”

As part of its analysis it examined Ireland’s tax competitiveness, emphasising that “Ireland’s marginal tax rate is high relative to the UK.”

Action

I am committed to further reductions in the burden of taxation, both to protect Ireland’s competitiveness and to reduce the pressure on hard pressed individuals and their families. The precise speed with which this can be done will be determined ultimately by the fiscal space available, which will be set out in the Government’s Summer Economic Statement.

Personal Taxation – Rates. Rather than simply abolishing the Universal Social Charge (USC), I favour a gradual reduction in the overall marginal tax rate in Ireland, which can be as high as 52% when Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI) and USC are taken into account. Our medium term goal should be to cut the marginal rate to under 50% in line with recommendations from the Irish Tax Institute.

Personal Taxation – Bands. Individuals currently pay the top 40% income tax rate at the low salary level of €33,800 in Ireland. I believe that tax bands must be raised over time so that less people pay the higher rate of tax. Tax payers in the UK have to earn twice this income before they reach the threshold for its higher tax rate.

Capital Gains Tax (CGT). While the rate of CGT is higher in Ireland than in the UK, I favour strengthening the reliefs for SMEs rather than a general cut in CGT which might well stoke further price rises in the housing sector. I am also committed to introducing further measures to ensure that SMEs have improved access to credit.

Education and Skills

The Institute for Management Development (IMD), in its Global Competitiveness Yearbook, ranks Ireland in 9th position when it comes to our education system meeting the needs of the economy. This compares to a ranking of 18th for the UK. Although this is a positive result I believe that Ireland needs to go further.

Action

- 1 The Departments of Education and Enterprise will be asked to produce, by year end, a joint plan to move Ireland into a top 3 position over the next 10 years.
- 2 The Department of Education will be asked, as part of my proposed Ireland 2040 planning process:
 - a. To take each of the high level policy goals contained in its Action Plan for Education and turn them by year end into a 20 year development framework for education in Ireland.
 - b. To produce by year end a long term strategy to make Ireland a world leader in Digital Education at primary, secondary and tertiary level within a decade from now.

Strategic Infrastructure

The NCC and others has also emphasised repeatedly the need to improve Ireland's infrastructure base, both to improve the competitiveness of indigenous enterprises and to attract additional inward investment.

Action

My next priority area sets out my plans for a major increase in infrastructure spending over the next 20 years.

3. Rebalancing Ireland: A New National Plan, Bridging the Urban/Rural Divide

Based on current demographic growth, the population of the island of Ireland should reach 8 million around 2030 and as high as 10 million by the mid-century. The challenge for Ireland is to put in place the kind of strategic infrastructure required to support such growth in a way which ensures that all regions benefit, while at the same time ensuring that Ireland meets ambitious targets for climate change.

Strategic Infrastructure

Although absolute levels of investment in Ireland are recovering, public investment as a proportion of gross fixed capital formation (2%) is still below both the UK and Euro average (2.7%). It is clear that we need to put in place an ambitious public investment programme, in order to raise public and public/private investment over the medium to longer term. By moving forward on this major project now we can take advantage of the historically low cost of finance, take into account the long lead in times involved, help release the economic potential of the regions, and significantly increase the competitiveness of Ireland's post-Brexit economy.

Action

I propose that Ireland should, as part of the Ireland 2040 planning framework, put in place a long term strategic infrastructure plan to prepare for an all island population of 10 million people. We should seek to provide up to €20 billion of dedicated capital funding for key infrastructure projects - mostly but not exclusively focused on transport infrastructure – over two decades from sources including the European Investment Bank, private funders and increased Exchequer provision. This plan will commence with the mid-term review of the current Capital Plan to 2021 and each subsequent capital plan review will prioritise the most important infrastructure projects until 2040.

A new Regional Infrastructure Fund (RIF) should also be established as part of the longer term national plan, to help mobilise the unique strengths of each region. As well as supporting the metropolitan areas of major cities the RIF will also focus on our small towns.

Green Infrastructure

One of the key strategic goals of Ireland 2040 is to deliver infrastructure in a way which also allows us to meet ambitious climate change targets. This will simply not be possible unless we benchmark ourselves against world leaders in this area - and if possible exceed them.

Action

I believe that Ireland must move towards a road system which is based around electric cars and a rail system which includes high and possibly very high speed rail. I propose that:

1. We set a specific date when only electric cars should be available for sale within Ireland. In Norway, although an oil rich country, has a target for 2025. This may be too ambitious a target in an Irish context, given our low starting point, but highlights what could be possible. The precise legislative mechanism by which this goal can be met in a European context will need to be determined.
2. All new buses should be electric by 2025 or employ other low carbon fuels.
3. A detailed study should be undertaken to examine the costs and benefits of a high and very high speed rail system in Ireland connecting major cities. This study should take into account both the direct financial costs of such systems as well as the positive impacts on economic growth, housing policy (for instance very high speed rail would allow travel from Galway to Dublin in under an hour, making commuting a real possibility) and climate change.

4. New Cities and Stronger Communities

Ireland has experienced a more spatially uneven pattern of regional and urban development than other similar OECD countries, and we depend more on our largest city than other comparator countries. Dublin has played a pivotal role in Ireland's economic success over the last half century, as well as contributing hugely to the vibrant culture of our nation. My ambition is to build on this success and make Dublin the most dynamic and livable capital city in Europe.

But I also want to ensure that other cities are able to add their own unique contribution to Ireland's future success, and drive regional growth and development. I believe we should target a doubling in the size of our other major cities by 2040. This area also looks at how Government can help support the creation of stronger and more resilient communities both within and outside our cities. We need vibrant rural towns and villages to complement and work with our cities. People should be encouraged to live in community settings rather than one-off housing.

Smart Green Cities

According to research quality of life in any city environment can be measured by a number of key criteria including:

- a) physical health;
- b) mental health and emotional wellbeing;
- c) the ability of people to access economic, cultural and political resources;
- d) their capacity to engage in social relationships; and
- e) the quality of their physical environment.

It is clear that our cities are not delivering on all of these criteria, resulting in people voting with their feet. Of the five Cities in the Republic (Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Waterford) only the Galway built-up area experienced consistent

population growth in excess of the national average (31%) from 1996-2016, increasing in population by more than 23,000 or 41%. By contrast, population growth in the Cork built-up area (28,300 or 16%), Limerick (15,600 or 20%) and Waterford (8,800 or 20%) have been significantly below the national average over the past 20 years, despite recent increases apparent in these three Cities and particularly in Cork, since 2011.

Action

The Ireland 2040 plan, when published later this year, will focus on how we can encourage more people to live in our cities. My ambition is to create a series of smart green cities across our country which will be able to attract new population growth. Ireland 2040 will set out how we will use new technologies and social media to ensure that everyone has the ability to participate in decision-making at both a city and local community level. It will also set out specific ways in which we will make city living more sustainable, both environmentally and in terms of individual quality of life. Each of our cities will be required to:

Produce a common Quality of Life Index (QLI) which will allow citizens to clearly compare the extent to which the five cities are succeeding in satisfying the needs of their inhabitants.

Deliver a Quality of Life Action Plan, which will set out how they intend to improve their QLI over the next ten years. This plan will be updated every three years on a rolling 10 year basis.

Produce a Climate Change Action Plan covering both the public and private sector, with detailed targets as part of a national plan to fight climate change. This plan will also be updated every three years. This plan will assess the risk to each city from climate change and include measures to mitigate these risks.

Stronger Communities

Over the past decade our communities have faced a series of economic, employment, housing and social challenges. As we return to a more sustainable economy it is vital that our communities are given the support they require.

Action

Ireland 2040 will incorporate a long term strategy to support our communities. The following initiatives, among others, will be included as part of this strategy.

Place Making

We will establish a best practice template for Place Making for the Irish built environment. It will provide a clear and easily understood set of guidelines and approaches for promoting a strong sense of place in communities for generations to come. At the core of this model will be the development of mixed tenure communities with multiple housing options (i.e. own door housing, apartments, downsizing) for couples, families and empty nesters. New developments will not be considered without reference to the Place Making template and it's critical list of requirements in relation to:

- > quality public places
- > green spaces
- > mixed used amenities
- > transportation choices
- > schools and third level education
- > sports and recreation
- > arts and culture
- > preservation of historical sites, and
- > broadband connectivity.

Strategic Regeneration

Local Government will be given additional responsibilities for taking on strategic and challenging projects that have a transformative effect on communities by, for example, facilitating growth in metropolitan areas, controlling urban sprawl, reorganising inner city areas and delivering major infrastructure.

Resilient Communities Fund

A Resilient Communities Fund will be established to provide support to community based projects that inspire and motivate people to get involved in making things happen and tackling problems in their own area. Projects to be prioritised for funding will focus on:

- > young people
- > the elderly
- > sports
- > heritage and culture
- > energy efficiency, and
- > the environment.

5. Empowering Citizens Through World Class Public Services

I believe that public services in any state should be judged by two clear criteria:

- > First, how well do they meet the immediate needs of the individual.
- > Second, how well do they help the individual reach their full potential.

Traditionally public services in Ireland have been more focused on the first of these goals rather than the second. The end result is a rather passive system of public services which does not do nearly enough to help people participate fully in society, with large segments of our population simply left behind. This makes neither moral nor economic sense. Our goal, instead, should be to create a truly enabling state which is focused on giving people the help they need to reach their full potential, and not just on supplying individuals with a basic safety net. In return each citizen must have an obligation to do everything they can to become more independent and self-sufficient. Rights must always come with responsibilities.

Action

Jobless Households: Our goal should be to reduce the rate of Jobless Households to at least the European average by 2030, and to become a top 3 performer in Europe by 2040. A defined strategy to meet these target will be included in Ireland 2040, building on the Government's Action Plan. The rate of jobless household in Ireland has consistently been significantly higher than in other European countries, even during the boom years, and is a key factor in driving welfare dependency, social exclusion and child poverty rates. We simply cannot allow so many of our people to be left behind without the ability to participate fully in society. Such a strategy should focus on four main categories of jobless households.

- > Households with Disability
- > Households with Lone Parents
- > Households with NEETs (Individuals not in employment, education or training), and
- > Households living in certain parts of the country with particularly high rates of joblessness.

Health Inequalities: The Dáil Committee on the Future of Healthcare will soon issue its report on possible options for the health system in the future and I await their findings with interest. However, regardless of the precise nature of its proposals I believe it is essential that a plan to substantially reduce health inequalities in Ireland should form one of the main pillars of Ireland 2040. All of the evidence suggests that health inequalities in Ireland are significant and that they prevent large segments of our population from fully participating in society.

Education Inequalities: The Action Plans for Education sets out a series of short to medium term targets to reduce educational disadvantage in Ireland. I will ask the department to prepare a longer term strategy as part of Ireland 2040. The continuing class divide in higher education is particularly concerning and will require major reform of the entire system to address its systemic causes.

Pensions Reform: I believe that major welfare and pensions reform must also be tackled. Too many people in Ireland are simply not providing for their retirement. In particular I believe that we should examine the benefits of moving to a system of Personal Welfare Accounts (PWAs) where each citizen is required to pay a share of their income into an individual account with their income tax liabilities/PRSI reduced accordingly. While there are a large number of different ways in which welfare accounts could be constructed, the available research suggests that they could make a significant difference to work Incentives, intergenerational poverty and administrative efficiency.

6. A Reunified Ireland

Brexit is not just an economic challenge. It also threatens to undermine some of the very valuable work which has been done in bringing together the various communities on this island over the last two decades. A hard border would also, in my opinion, result in lower economic growth for both parts of this island.

I believe now is the time for Fine Gael to develop a positive economic and strategic case for the reunification of Ireland, over time and within the EU. Our party has a proud history of working to bring all communities on the two islands of Ireland and Britain together. The establishment of the New Ireland forum in 1983 by Garret Fitzgerald, which in turn led to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, began a process of engagement which eventually delivered the Good Friday peace agreement. We have always recognised as a party that reunification, if it is to happen, must be about more than unifying territory or winning 50% + 1 vote in some future border poll. It must always be about uniting people and communities.

Action

Fine Gael should immediately begin drafting a White Paper on possible reunification after a process of intensive consultation with the membership, to be published before the party's Ard Fheis in November.

A joint committee of the Dáil should be asked to draft a position paper setting out a range of possible options for the future of North-South relations.

An All Island Forum should be established in 2018 - with representative from all parts of the island of Ireland, from the European Union and from the United Kingdom - to consider how relations might evolve between the two parts of Ireland in the wake of Brexit. The Forum would be free to discuss all possible options.

7. Positive Leadership Abroad

I am a proud European and believe strongly in the idea of the European Union. However, both Brexit and a growing anti-EU sentiment in other European countries suggest that urgent reform of the EU and its institutions is required. The EU is seen by too many of its citizens to be a remote and at times uncaring entity. More concerned with maintaining fiscal rules than with the issues which matter most to its citizens, such as more jobs and better public services.

I believe that Ireland, as the only English-speaking country committed to the EU, is in a unique position to contribute to the debate about the future shape and direction of the Union. To date the Irish Government has made real progress in persuading other members of the necessity to provide Ireland with significant support as it deals with the consequences of Brexit. These efforts must clearly continue. However, I want the Irish Government to go further and widen its engagement with the EU.

I am also convinced, as a former Minister for Defence, that Ireland can play a much stronger global role through the United Nations. Since Ireland first joined the UN in 1955 it has contributed substantially to the work of the organisation, particularly in the area of peacekeeping. But I believe that our level of engagement must be both broadened and deepened as we respond to the increasingly diverse range of threats which now confront us, ranging from climate change to cyber terrorism to mass migration.

Action

The Government should publish a White Paper on the future of the EU by the end of this year, setting out clearly the kind of European Union which it wants to see develop. A Europe which is more open and democratic and which is focused on the issues that matter most to its citizens.

The Departments of Foreign Affairs and Defence should also be asked to jointly produce a 20 year strategy for Ireland's involvement in the UN in a range of areas including peacekeeping, climate change and the protection of migrants and other displaced people.

I am also in favour of Ireland putting in place more positive immigration policies, focusing on individuals who have either high skills or are in need of humanitarian assistance. While I believe that Ireland must, particularly in a post-Brexit context, strengthen its border controls to reduce illegal immigration, I would also support a new path to citizenship for undocumented individuals who have been here for more than 3 years.



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