

Just over a year ago, the Irish people turned to Fine Gael and the Labour Party at a time of national crisis.

We told the people then that it was time to get Ireland working again and that our plan was designed to make that happen.

The Irish people gave us their support and their trust in historic numbers.

I thank you for your trust.

Thank you for your belief, and for your patience, and for your sacrifice.

You gave us a mandate and a responsibility to clear away the air of fear and uncertainty.

To get our country moving in the right direction again.

Therefore, as we gather at this Ard Fheis, our purpose cannot be one of celebration.

We will not celebrate until Ireland has reason to celebrate. Tonight, unemployment remains too high. Too many families are struggling to make ends meet. Too many worry about losing their homes. Too many of our children are still moving away.

Our purpose now must be to redouble our efforts, to work even harder to deliver our plan.

To get Ireland Working.

To retrieve our economic independence and take back our country.

These tough times require straight talk.

So we will continue to be straight and honest with the people.

To tell them what we have done to meet our pledges, and how much work remains to be done.

To explain to people the scale of the challenge that remains.

This government has made a solid start, but we have a long way to go. Fine Gael and Labour are providing Ireland with a strong and stable government.

Our first priority was to stabilise the economy. That meant a tough Budget in which we had to make very difficult choices. I know that for many people, the measures we have had to take have been painful. But we are doing the best we can to protect the most vulnerable by reversing the cut in the minimum wage; by protecting basic welfare payments; and by exempting 330,000 low paid and part-time workers from the Universal Social Charge.

The public finances are coming under control, and the budget deficit will be down to 3% of GDP by 2015. We have downsized and recapitalized the banking system. Investor confidence is starting to return. Deposits are flowing back into our banks and several multi-national companies have announced investments to create further jobs, and others intend to follow.

Exports are performing strongly due to our improved competitiveness. Ireland's international standing is being restored.

Over the past year, the Tanaiste and I, along with the other members of the Government, have worked hard to convince international political and business leaders that Ireland now has a serious government with a serious plan.

A government that can be trusted.

Crucial to that mission has been proving our determination to tackle the economic problems we inherited.

Our commitments under the EU/IMF agreement are being delivered in full and on time. The interest rates on these loans have been reduced, saving us €10 billion. The interest rates on Irish government bonds have fallen steadily. We have made a

start on jobs.

Our first Budget saw no increase in income tax. Because taxing work damages jobs.

Our first jobs initiative helped create 6,000 jobs in the tourism and hospitality sectors. Already, 20,000 men and women have taken up training places on schemes including JobBridge and Springboard. We have made it much easier for foreign investors to visit and create jobs in Ireland.

Yes – this is a start.

But there is so much further to go, with so much more effort and imagination required.

We have also made a start on reforming the political system itself.

We cut ministerial pay and transport costs. The entitlements of former Taoisigh have been withdrawn. Work is continuing on legislation to reduce the size of the Dáil, and to prepare for a referendum for the abolition of the Seanad. I believe that more women should become involved in Irish politics.

To encourage more women into politics we are linking State funding of political parties to the level of female participation in elections. Parties, including our own, will be penalised if they do not fulfil these conditions.

We are continuing to reform the wider public sector. We are reducing the size and cost of the public service, and radically cutting the number of state agencies.

We need to reform the way we deliver our essential public services like health, education and justice. We must provide people with the quality services they deserve at a lower cost. To achieve this, we need the continued support and co-operation of those who work in our public service and the unions that represent them.

The shameful and corrupt practices revealed in the Moriarty and Mahon Tribunal Reports must never be allowed to happen again. That's why this Government is taking firm action to break the link between business and political funding. That interaction should be based solely on achieving economic recovery through creating jobs.

Our new laws on political funding will ban corporate donations over €200 to a political party unless they are registered and declared.

We will create a register of lobbyists and enact new laws to give protection to those who discover and report unethical behaviour. These long overdue reforms, along with other measures being considered by Government, will help to put integrity, transparency and honesty back at the heart of public life.

While the steps we have taken in the first year have brought stability, we recognise that some of the pledges we made have not been delivered.

We had intended to legislate to end upward only rent reviews, but this has proven to be impossible because of constitutional difficulties.

We kept our promise to increase mortgage interest relief for people who bought their homes at the height of the property boom, but mortgage arrears remain a serious problem for far too many families.

We have made some progress in reducing the penal burden on the Irish people of the previous Government's bailout of the banks.

Through a combination of burden sharing on junior bondholders, private investment and avoiding asset fire sales, we have more than halved the cost to tax payers envisaged in the original plan.

But despite these improvements, this burden remains too heavy.

Let me be clear. I will not throw away the progress we have made in the last year by renegeing on our international

commitments.

Ireland will NOT default.

But we are determined to ease this burden on our people.

That's why we are negotiating with our Troika partners to find a cheaper way of financing the cost of bank recapitalisation.

That's why the €3.1 billion promissory note payment due to be paid to Anglo Irish Bank on Monday is not being paid. But is being replaced by a long-term government bond and the wider negotiations will continue.

The year ahead is a crucial one for rebuilding and recovery.

An essential first step – and the Government's immediate priority – will come at the end of May when the Irish people vote on the European Stability Treaty.

Throughout my recent visits to the United States, and to China this week, the consistent message from both political and business leaders is that they see Ireland's place as a fully committed member of the Eurozone as a crucial element of Ireland's attractiveness as a location for investment.

I cannot over-state it.

In this referendum, we have a brilliant opportunity to say to the world that Ireland believes in the future of the Euro, that Ireland is central to the future of the Eurozone, that Ireland is four-square with Europe, as together we build a system that will bring responsible budgeting to Euro governments and Euro nations across the entire Eurozone.

This commitment is an investment in our children's future, and in our country's future.

Never again will a government be able to behave recklessly and arrogantly with the people's money.

In recent months alone numerous multi-national companies have shown their confidence in Ireland by committing to new investments here.

I want to continue and grow this strong flow of inward investment in the future...for our future.

I want Ireland to have the same access as other countries to the insurance policy of the ESM – a critical reassurance for investors.

We can do this, we can achieve this....by voting YES.

Yes to Europe.

Yes to Jobs.

Yes to Ireland.

YES on May 31st.

As you know, my message while abroad recently has been strong and clear – Ireland is open for business.

Now is the time to invest in our recovery.

I recently signed economic co-operation agreements with China and the United Kingdom, both of which offer significant potential for the future.

We must translate that rising international confidence into more jobs all across this country.

We are a nation of doers and entrepreneurs. But there are still too many obstacles to job creation – too much red tape, too many high costs and too many archaic regulations.

The measures taken in the Jobs' Initiative last May have helped. But this is not nearly enough.

I always said that this was only a first step towards my commitment to make jobs the top priority of this Government.

Jobs are about more than work. Jobs are about dignity, incentive, pride.

More jobs mean better lives, stronger communities, more resources for public services, and less debt. That's why last month, this Government published our Action Plan for Jobs.

We aim to create 100,000 extra jobs by 2016. The plan contains 270 separate actions to remove the barriers to job creation. Actions to cut the cost of red-tape by a quarter. Actions to cut the different employments-rights bodies from five to two.

Banks must become part of the solution to the jobs crisis by meeting their agreed lending targets.

The Partial-Loan Guarantee Scheme will give existing companies more and better access to bank credit. We will stimulate investment in infrastructure by using some of the proceeds from the disposal of State assets to pay for extra investment in areas like water and energy that can boost jobs and growth.

We will make it easier to expand into overseas markets, for example with tax reliefs for companies sending sales-people to the rapidly-expanding economies of China, Brazil and India.

We will also support traditional sectors of the economy, such as the plan to double food exports by 2020.

Action will be taken to ignite new sectors of the economy – such as cloud computing, digital gaming and data content storage.

I believe that in the next five years, Ireland can become a global hub for cloud computing. The key to the success of this jobs plan is in the title – ACTION.

All Government Ministers and State Agencies are committed to the delivery of this plan. My Department of the Taoiseach will drive its implementation throughout the public service.

In fact, the idea of 'drive' is behind every aspect of what this government is undertaking.

And this drive makes sure that economic recovery does not by-pass those who have lost their jobs, their wealth and even their self-confidence in this recession.

People on the live register must be put at the top of the queue to fill new jobs as they arise.

Ireland hasn't been good enough to, or strong enough for its jobseekers. The supports have been too passive and too scattered. The vast majority of people who are out of work want a hand up, not a hand out. These men and women know the dignity of work, and feel its absence in their lives. Our Pathways to Work Plan will help those people.

From now on, the day a person loses their job is the day the State starts helping them to find another job, or to train for another job.

In place of FAS there will be a one-stop-shop for job-seekers where welfare claims will be processed thoroughly and quickly.

This new person-centred system will identify and help those most at risk of being unemployed long-term. With all the difficult consequences of that. Because of our duty to help people find work and to use their talents for their own good and for the good of the country, we will give employers additional incentives to hire people who are currently out of work.

That means extending the employer PRSI exemption scheme from 12 to 18 months.

This Government wants work to pay. It has to be seen to be a more attractive option than staying on the dole.

That is why in the last Budget we delivered on our commitment not to increase taxes on income and work.

Now we will ensure that the social protection system incentivises, rather than discourages, people from returning to work.

Reforms to the jobseekers' schemes are being introduced to ensure that people in part-time employment are encouraged to take up full-time employment whenever possible.

We also need to show the debt-distressed in our communities that there is light at the end of tunnel.

For too many people, the only escape from unsustainable debts is long-term bankruptcy, economic inactivity or emigration.

I know this.

I'm frustrated that we haven't been able to move as fast as we wanted to, to tackle the mortgage crisis.

So, I've appointed a temporary Cabinet Committee, which I chair, to drive action in four vital areas:

Firstly, we will work with the Financial Regulator to encourage banks to offer "negative equity mortgages", whereby families can, depending on their circumstances, trade up or down.

Secondly, we will finalise and enact a Personal Insolvency Bill designed to rebalance the rights of the borrower and lender, in a fairer way.

Thirdly, we will expand the use of "mortgage to rent" for families who can no longer afford their mortgages, to allow them to sell their houses and rent them back at affordable rents.

Fourthly, to free up the housing market, we are giving additional mortgage interest relief to first time buyers who buy their homes before the end of 2012.

These steps are to protect our families and to keep our children in the most powerful and precious place they will ever have in their lives: HOME.

This is a great country with unlimited potential. We are now regarded the world over as being a country on the way back. We have the best young generation on the planet. Our challenge is to harness all these qualities together and nothing will stop us.

We've overcome hardship and adversity in the past. We've overcome poverty and deprivation in the past. We've beaten all these difficulties.

I don't have all the answers but I do know this: a government that works hard, that brings honesty, clarity and decisiveness in its service of the people will not fail.

It is my privilege to lead such a Government and I am proud to do so.

And I look forward to achieving my ambition that by 2016 we will prove to be the best small country in the world to do business, the best country in which to raise a family, and the best country in which to grow old with dignity and respect. My Government will work with you to fulfil these ambitions in the interest of our future, our country and our children.