

"20/ 20 Vision" - Annual Maurice Roche Lecture, to National Conference in Cork

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ADDRESS BY

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PROGRESSIVE DEMOCRATS

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20/20 Vision

Delegates, friends,

It is a great honour for me to deliver the second annual Maurice Roche Lecture; Maurice was both a valued friend and inspirational colleague. Someone, who made an incredible contribution to the success of our Party, and more importantly of our country.

I recently came across a quote, which could have been written to describe him- "Leadership is courage and wisdom, and great carelessness of self". Maurice may not have been a leader in the conventional public sense, but he was a thought leader. Someone who forges the ideas that shapes the future. He was never afraid to challenge the conventional wisdom; - ever eager to champion new ideas and fresh perspectives on the challenges facing our country.

In an age when political advisors are in the main spin-doctors, focused on photo-ops and opinion polls, whose advice is invariably politically expedient rather than morally correct, Maurice was exceptional. He was a pure ideas man. His two acid tests for every course of action.... is it good for the country and is it the right thing to do?

The truth is of course that ideas matter far more in politics than people think. And this party, more than any other in Irish politics is driven by the power of new ideas and new thinking. We are only here, because we are needed. Those who vote for us do so because they see we are needed.

Our party was born almost 20 years ago. It was born at a time of national crisis and deep despair. A time when it seemed that the promise of the founding fathers, that Ireland governed by the people of Ireland would be a better Ireland - had failed.

What one writer has called the "knuckle-headed policies" of successive Governments had created a country that was over-taxed and underemployed. Where small golden circles were prosperous, while PAYE taxpayers were fleeced; a nation who's most valuable export was its young people. This chronic state of affairs had been normalised.

The Progressive Democrats were formed to challenge these "knuckle headed" policies. To challenge the view that state intervention is the answer to every problem, to restore faith in the free market, to promote competition and enterprise, to fight corruption, and lower taxes.

We were reviled; mocked as selfish marketeers and Thatcherites. But unfortunately for our critics we succeeded, and helped to break the policy logjam that had for so long held back our potential as an economy and as a people.

Today our nation is transformed - from a nation of emigrants, to a nation of immigrants. From an object lesson in economic failure, to role model for economic success. From a nation gripped by gloom, to a nation and a people suffused with confidence.

Our recent achievements we can look to with pride. But we cannot dwell there. Our task as a political party is to solve current problems and position ourselves to meet the challenges of the future.

So what is the new agenda? To read the media pundits you would think the New Ireland is a nation of people who are greedy, materialistic, uncaring, devoid of spirituality, devoted only to empty consumerism. The impression is given that New Ireland is all about sports cars and private helicopters and property developers swigging cocktails while discussing new investment property in Budapest! Sure many people have prospered. The term millionaire has moved from the exotic to the unexceptional. But I reject that narrow and begrudging characterisation of the New Ireland. Let's look at the facts.

Greedy, materialistic and uncaring? By March of this year, the allegedly uncaring Irish people contributed €75m to Tsunami Relief. Devoid of spirituality? €20m of this amount was raised at Masses in one weekend in January, while the Presbyterian Church in Ireland raised €2.5m and the Church of Ireland of Ireland's Bishop's appeal raised €889,000. Mourning for the Pope is sincere and widespread.

In my experience these days, time is an even more precious commodity than money. And the truth is that many thousands of Irish people of all faiths and none gave generously of their time to the organisation of the Special Olympics. Communities the length and breadth of country opened up their homes and their hearts to the competitors in an event which brought joy to the competitors, honour to the organisers, and I hope some greater understanding to those of us who viewed it.

So, evidentially not everyone spends all their money or their time at the mall!

More and more I detect a 'disconnect' between the social commentary expressed by the pundits and the opinions actually held by the people. Nor am I alone in this. The thousands of Euro invested by virtually all of the major parties in focus group research, to determine the attitudes of the general public to political parties and their policies is a confirmation that most politicians no longer trust the pundits to accurately reflect public opinion.

The relentless negativity found there is at odds with the natural optimism and positive nature of the Irish people. Commentators vie with each other as to who is the most socially compassionate, or rather who is the most conspicuously compassionate.

There is a quasi-religious and fundamentalist tone to their hectoring on the theme of Social Democracy. For them, profit is still a dirty word. And, "sure weren't we happier when we were poor".

For of course to the pundits on the left, so pervasive in the media and elsewhere, what signifies the "greed" of the Irish people is our unwillingness to pay more taxes.

Make no mistake. What they are advocating for is a return to the failed policies of the past. They now call it social democracy, which sounds modern, and European and vaguely Scandinavian, the policy equivalent of IKEA but the reality is a return to the tax and spend policies of the past - the "knuckle-headed" policies of the past.

The real challenge facing Ireland now I would suggest is not a descent into mindless hedonism as suggested. It is the challenge of rapid growth, of putting in place the necessary infrastructure physical and social to support people and communities in a period of rapid change and urbanisation.

The truth is that New Ireland is every bit as much about people carriers as sports cars; about double buggies as investments in Budapest; about bringing the family down to B&Q as swigging cocktails in fancy bars.

The truth is that in 2003, Ireland had the highest fertility rate in the European union, that Ireland has the second highest percentage of young people under the age of 15 in the European Union, and that between 1995 and 2004 the number of two person households increased by 45% and the number of 3 person or more households increased by 16%.

People do not take out mortgages, buy houses, enter long-term relationships and start families if they are not confident in their own abilities and their nation's future. All the evidence is that we are a confident and optimistic people.

The truth is that New Ireland is a nation of young families. Many of these new young families live in the commuter belt of Dublin or other major cities and are faced with the problems of lack of access to affordable childcare, inadequate infrastructure, and poor planning.

Lack of access to affordable childcare - no it didn't take the recent by-elections to tell us that childcare was an issue. John Minihan had crafted a well thought policy on childcare last year which will form the basis of the Progressive Democrat approach to meeting this challenge.

Lack of proper infrastructure.

As a nation we are still paying for the under investment of the 1980's. This Government is now making the necessary investments, our capital programme represents 5% of GDP, more than twice the European average, but it will take time to put in place the appropriate infrastructure. In the meantime I think the public is quite right to ask why all too often the words "on time and on budget" are not used when describing infrastructure projects in Ireland.

Poor planning.

There is a serious disconnect between central and local Government; between the provision of housing and the provision of social infrastructure. The planning system is opaque with seemingly one set of rules for individuals and another for property developers.

Like it or not there exists in the minds of the public a belief that the corrupt practices which have been driven out of Dublin have found pastures new in which to thrive. In the Progressive Democrats we believe in open and transparent Government and we will bring these principles to bear in planning as in other areas of public life.

There is finally the huge problem which impacts on everyone; - the challenge of reforming the Health Service; to deliver a world-class not a third class Health Service. We will hear later from our Tánaiste her plans in this regard.

These are serious problems but they are not insurmountable and frankly, they pale into insignificance compared to what we faced in the 1980's. As a Party and as a Government, we have the will, the vision and for once the necessary resources to deal with these issues and we will! That is why we are elected.

Of one thing I am certain; the answer to these challenges is not to be found in increasing the tax burden on young Irish families. They do not want to pay more in tax and they are right. The desire to live in a nice house, to drive a decent car and to provide a good start for their families is not greed; it is their entitlement.

It is something that most people in the developed world have enjoyed for years and I see no reason why young Irish people should not aspire to the same standards of living, which others in the EU and the US have enjoyed for years.

I see no reason why people who work hard and are prepared to make sacrifices for their families, and play by the rules, should not be able to enjoy the fruits of their labours. The more they are encouraged to work hard and prosper, the more revenues will be generated for the vulnerable in our society. That is our idea of social justice.

Currently the Irish Government spends over €40bn a year and the Irish public Service employs in excess of 340,000 people in 572 separate Departments and Agencies.

In the last number of years we have been able to increase public sector spending significantly because the economy, driven by the pro-enterprise policies of this administration, has been growing strongly. I do not believe that it is either wise or prudent to advocate increasing public sector investment by means of increasing the tax burden. The scope to do so is limited; the potential to cause real and lasting damage to our economy is great.

I believe that we as a Party and we as a party in Government need to look not at raising taxes on ordinary workers but at ensuring value for money and that requires the transformation of public service at a number of levels.

Let me give you just a few practical example of what I mean. Government in Ireland is the country's largest business. It is the single largest purchaser of goods and services in the State. But it is not run as a business. It does not use the best and latest procurement practices.

If one were to apply the latest best practice in procurement we could probably save somewhere in the region of €480m a year. That means more money for schools, crèches and other social supports and services.

I recently spoke to a Minister who had just discovered that the cost of administering one particular payment scheme was as great as the actual payment itself.

Currently, there is no incentive for a public servant to save public money. In point of fact there are numerous incentives to do the exact opposite.

If you are prudent and save money, the current budgetary process will take any money you save back to the central exchequer. If you spend all your allocation, the chances are that you will have more money given to you. So we reward the profligate and punish the prudent and then wonder why the cost of Government goes up every year!

So you may ask, why are we not doing something about it?

The answer is we are. In the two Departments we control we have begun to address fundamental reform in the way the public service operates. In Justice Michael McDowell is pursuing measures to ensure that more Gardaí are freed up from pushing paper to patrolling the streets. In Health the Tánaiste Mary Harney has begun the single greatest change management effort in the history of the State. With the new Health Service Executive, Mary is making sure there is real and clear accountability for every euro spent, and that value for money is an integral part of the HSE's operations. Mary will also work on negotiating better value for money in the €1bn plus we spend on drugs.

As a party we are addressing the problems of today. But we must also look to the future; how can we best position our nation to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world?

Perhaps one of the best ways to celebrate the first 20 years of the Progressive Democrats as a party is to begin to think of what kind of country we want to live in twenty years from now. I believe we need to take some time out for reflection, to lift our gaze and attention from today's problems to tomorrow's challenges.

For the first time in our nation's history, we are a prosperous people. Prosperity is not license to abandon prudence, but it does give us the freedom to choose our future in a way denied to previous generations of Irish people. We should not choose the default option of just drifting along waiting for the future to happen to us. We should plan for the best rather than prepare for the worst

The world we live in, in the first years of the new millennium, is full of both great opportunities and threats. Rapid technological development has delivered untold benefits to humanity, yet it has also delivered weapons of mass destruction to people with medieval mind-sets. Globalisation has delivered prosperity to the connected nations of the developed and developing world, yet failed to touch the lives of millions in failed and underdeveloped States in Africa and Asia. The threat of war based on a clash of ideologies has receded, but the threat of war based on a clash of civilisations has increased.

As a small open economy on the periphery of Western Europe we too face many opportunities and threats.

Membership of the European Union and farsighted domestic policies has delivered growth and prosperity. But now the centre of gravity of the Union has shifted eastward and the new

nations of the European Union have learnt and are implementing the lessons of the Irish experience. Good on them. We must compete and regroup.

We have benefited from being the nation in the European Union closest in many ways to the US, but what if Europe and the US continue to diverge?

As the most Globalised Economy in the world we have benefited more, perhaps than any nation from the Globalisation phenomenon, yet we now face competition in manufacturing from China and in areas like software production from India.

I believe the greatest threat to our prosperity is not external but internal; it is not some sudden economic shock, but smug complacency, which is the greatest threat to our prosperity. If we fail to think seriously about the future, if we fail to set ourselves new and ambitious goals, we will fail to plan and thus plan to fail.

The list I have just enunciated is daunting, but it is no more daunting a world than the world we faced 20 years ago when we laboured under the threat of nuclear annihilation and Ireland was gripped by economic malaise, when we were the basket case of Europe.

To be perfectly honest, as a small nation there is little we can do to alter the state of the world but make some positive contribution to the global community. We don't have to solve all the problems of the world but we can and should bring the unique skills and experience we have to the service of the greater common good. I will discuss this further in a few moments.

I should stress that when I talk about planning I am not referring to some grand socialist 5-year plan to make Ireland the leading producer of tractors, computerised widgets, or whatever. Nor do I believe that we can sit down and list and then implement all of the actions necessary to drive continued economic growth and social harmony. Any such task is beyond my or anyone else's intellectual competence. Stalin tried it and the result was economic disaster and social misery.

No. The process I have in mind is very different; I think we need to consider what the world might look like in say 7, 8, 10, 20 years. The idea is not to attempt to predict the future but to think seriously about the forces, which will shape it.

Then to consider where we are now, what strengths and weakness we have, what threats and opportunities exist for us now and in the future.

Then to figure out what are the two or three initiatives that we can take to best position ourselves for the future? There is no point in thinking of many more. There is a limit to what any Government can do at any one time. Those who attempt to advance on all fronts tend to advance on none - as Maurice would say.

So to advance effectively, I think we must reach out and seek new thinking and new thinkers.

We must engage with a new generation of young thinkers and doers whether that is among the younger members of our own party or indeed outside the party. Some of these will be in

academia and business. Others may come from the new immigrant communities. As a party we should actively seek out the best and the brightest of the next generation and give them the opportunity to begin to shape the future through progressive and dynamic politics.

There are a number of areas, which I think such a process might usefully focus on.

In terms of Ireland's contribution to the Global community we punch well above our weight. We don't do wars. We do development and peacekeeping. I believe that the minimum that we could and should do is fulfil the promise we made to the Third World to donate 0.7% of GNP to overseas development aid. I know that I may seem to some people, like a broken record on this issue. But it is something I feel passionately about and will not abandon. I have seen at first hand the tremendous work Irish aid workers are doing; the tremendous difference that funding from the Irish Government has made to millions of human beings in the developing world, particularly in Africa.

Once you have seen suffering abated, hunger sated and fear give way to hope, because of aid funding, you cannot turn away. When you have seen the scale of unmet needs, when you know that lives are saved by intervention, it becomes not a choice but a moral imperative.

We gave a solemn commitment; we made a promise in our full senses to the international community that we would donate 0.7% of GNP by a timeframe, which has been allowed to slip. In this party we keep our word, I believe in this Government we should do the same.

We have the resources. And the people wish it. We should deliver it. There could be no greater gift to our departed Pope than to double our Aid Budget and urge others to do likewise.

However I believe that donation should be the beginning and not the end of our contribution to the global community. We are well capable of using our experience and skill sets to develop areas of specialist competencies in the development field.

We are already focussing on a strategic response to the pandemic of HIV AIDS in Africa - on Education, Health and Sanitation. But given all the legitimate concerns about bad governance and corruption in Africa we could add another specialisation?

The Irish Public Service has built up a wealth of expertise across a wide range of functions in Government from Revenue Collection to Regulation and Policy Development, particularly Industrial Policy. Could we not develop an expertise in Governance for development? Building democratic administrations is vital for the development of poor countries. We could have a world-class centre for Good Governance based in Ireland.

Our current model of aid is widely acclaimed. We focus on the poorest of the poor in the poorest regions of the world. 15,000 Africans die every day of preventable and treatable diseases. Over half of the population in Africa live on less than a dollar a day. This is a scandal in a world of plenty and it is reversible, if the rich would just honour commitments freely made to reach The Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Ireland should lead from the front on this. It's good for the country and it's the right thing to do.

Closer to home in terms of a domestic agenda for future action I have already mentioned the area of public sector modernisation. I believe that creating a Public Service for the 21st Century will be one of the great challenges for Governments everywhere. Modernisation of the Public Service will mean changes in legislation, processes, and the way in which public servants are trained and the way in which they work. We are deeply fortunate in Ireland in the quality and calibre of our public servants and in the excellence of their work. The recent (widely praised) Irish Presidency of the European Union is testament to their excellence, but that does not mean we can rest on our laurels, the time to modernise is not when you experience problems, but before you do so.

Government has grown in size and complexity, we must be proactive not reactive in dealing with the challenges facing the public service.

Another area I feel that we will need to address is sustaining communities and supporting properly functioning families. The rapid pace and pressures of modern life have weakened the ties that bind our communities together. More and more people are having difficulty balancing life and work issues. For some time now there has been a phenomenon of high achieving women dropping out of the workplace because they felt unable to balance the needs of family and working life. Now many men are facing the same pressures. We need to find new and creative ways to tackle these issues. After all, the childbearing years are a relatively short period of a woman's working life. Modern families need more flexibility and support while children are pre-school. We have to devise flexible solutions to match the diversity of modern families. As we go forward I think we will find that the need in Ireland to create social capital in the 21st Century will be as great as the need to create financial capital was in the 20th century.

I frankly have no idea (beyond what I read in the Economist) of what the growth industries will be in the future or global macro-economic trends, but I am sure that there are many in the party who will have insights and views (and being Progressive Democrats) trenchant views. I would urge you to bring these views to the debate at General Council.

In summary, I believe that we as Party may take justifiable pride in our achievements over the last 20 years; we have defied our critics just by still being here.

We can take pride in the past, but we cannot dwell there. We must face head on, the problems our people face today. We must make a tangible and positive difference to the lives of ordinary people. I do not agree with the constant negativity of our professional pundit class, the smug disdain which dismisses the honourable ambition for a better life as mere greed and selfishness. The pundits for ever see the glass half-full, the silver lining always attached to a bank of rain clouds, and every other country but Ireland as being worthy of admiration.

The success of the Celtic Tiger has not given us the right to look down on anyone. But it has given us the right to look the nations of the world in the eye, as equals. We need no longer imitate anyone. We can craft our own course and create our own destiny.

The policy prescriptions propounded by the pundits of higher taxation and greater State intervention is not new, or New Ireland. They are old Ireland. They didn't work in the 80's and they won't work now. Back to the future is not a policy option.

Let us celebrate our 20th birthday by reflecting on the challenges and begin to craft the ideas and policies, which will sustain the nation in the years ahead.

Today I have outlined some ideas I think might be relevant to such an exercise, I look forward to discussing these and other ideas with the delegates here this evening, and in the weeks ahead.

So, as I look to the future as a Progressive Democrat. I am filled not with foreboding, but with confidence and ambition for Ireland. We have one of the youngest populations in the European Union. We are a young vigorous and vibrant people; confident in our ability to face whatever the future holds. The best is yet to come.

Our young and energetic immigrants will, in my view, be the making of us. But for them to stay with us and become enthusiastic citizens we must embrace their problems and needs and celebrate the diversity they bring.