

From Immigration to Integration - Party Conference Address

22nd April 2006

Party Chief Whip Liz O'Donnell addressed the closing session on the important topic of integration.

Perhaps the most exciting change to have taken place in the last ten years of economic prosperity has been the change from mass emigration and all the despair it created, to net inward migration. The most important political achievement of this generation has been the move from 20% unemployment and losing 50,000 emigrants each year, to today - when we have almost full employment, and are creating more jobs than we can fill.

This employment and the prosperity it brings, coupled with the low and fair tax system espoused by the Progressive Democrats, has allowed us to do so much more to deliver social justice. It has generated the revenues to enable us to make record investment in services and facilities for the most vulnerable in our community. That is something we dreamed of for years. In contrast, Ireland has found itself with relatively little time to consider how it can and should provide for the thousands of new people coming here, to work, live, enhance and prosper.

Changing Ireland

Our economy has become a magnet for immigrants from both the accession states of the European Union and elsewhere in search of a new life. The pace of change has been dramatic, between 1990 and 1994 Ireland was the only country of the EU with a negative net migration rate. However, from 1995 our average annual migration rate moved up to second highest in the EU. Surpassed only by Luxembourg. There are few signs that immigration will end soon. One recent report says the population of the Republic will grow by 30% to over 5.3 million by 2020, and to six million by 2050. It predicts that immigrants could account for a fifth of the population by 2020.

So while in the 1980's the challenge was in staunching the flow of emigration, and the loss of so many of our talented and educated young people.

Today the challenge is integrating new immigrants into Irish society. This is all good news! It is not a threatening situation.

There is no downside economically or socially. If there is, it will be because of a failure of policy and a failure of governance.

And, the social challenge posed is not just an Irish one - it is a challenge for the entire European Union. Immigration and integration remain key issues for the EU and its member states. Some 1.7 million immigrants settled in the EU in 2005. The integration of established immigrant communities and new immigrants is of particular importance for EU leaders.

The widespread rioting throughout France in late 2005, and events in the Netherlands have underlined the importance of getting integration policy right.

Adapting Policy

After the last general election, this Government renewed its promise to review immigration and residence policy to manage some of the rapid changes Ireland is experiencing. Progress is being made. For example, we now have more than 500 language support teachers in our schools working with children whose first language isn't English.

Much credit is due to our colleague and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Michael McDowell. He has overseen many positive developments.

- The 'National Action Plan Against Racism' and strategic monitoring group was launched last year.
- Overhauling the system responsible for visa, asylum and citizenship applications, which was totally unprepared and ill-equipped, when we came into office.
- Measures to promote the acceptance of lawful immigrants into Irish economic and cultural life, with particular emphasis on sport and cultural matters.
- We have a new Gárda policy to encourage recruitment of minorities.
- We have strong anti-discrimination legislation.

Posing Questions

The Government and Department of Justice have taken many positive steps. Yet, as a Party of government the Progressive Democrats must ask how to take even more. Is our objective assimilation? Integration? Interculturalism? Is our policy adjusting quickly enough? Is it flexible or overly bureaucratic? Is it humane?

Is our justice apparatus the correct one to implement new policy? Is citizenship being thought of properly, as a means of promoting a more inclusive, intercultural Irish society? The excellent research of Philip Watt, the National Consultative Committee on Racism, and many others both prompt these questions, and point toward some answers.

Clear in Our Objective

We have to get a clear idea in our own minds what it is we want to achieve as a society - with any policy. Without this starting point, actions will not yield the desired results. Do we seek assimilation: *When in Ireland, do as the Irish do* - the 'like it or lump it' approach? This largely discredited approach may be enjoying something of a post 911 revival in subtle guises in some countries, but it is not for Ireland.

Our own history of migration calls for a more humane approach. Making a life in a foreign land has been one of the persistent challenges facing generations of Irish since the great famine as people fled a country that was unable to provide them with the opportunity to forge a life for themselves.

That race memory should and indeed does inform our approach. Good outcomes will not happen by chance.

Immigration is a new experience, as I said, resulting from the explosive economic growth since the second half of the 1990's. But our societal- memories, as a collective, as a nation have not diminished to the point that either segregation or assimilation are desirable objectives for us. And they never will be. True integration and interculturalism, which guarantees equality and parity of esteem, must be our goal.

What does this mean? The Progressive Democrats believe that a specific form of integration is the preferable option. An integration that fosters interculturalism, applies to recent and longer-term migrants, and indeed indigenous ethnic majorities, and is cognisant of the type of society in which the integration should take place.

We should encourage a process of mutual respect and adjustment. Encourage newcomers to understand and accept basic Irish values while in turn encouraging Irish people to accept and respect the cultural differences newcomers bring to Ireland.

If we are to be honest, closer to home we cannot claim that we as a society have dealt well with the travelling community and the cultural challenges in their integration. There was racism and discrimination in Ireland long before we had immigrants among us.

So, rather than expecting newcomers to abandon their cultures the emphasis must be integrating difference in a culturally diverse society. This is a truly interculturalist approach? A policy that marks a distinct shift away from any form of *laissez faire* or ad-hoc policy approach. In this area, good outcomes will not happen by chance.

A loose aspiration of multiculturalism is a recipe for disaster. It must be rights-based and planned.

Integration of newcomers must be a two way process involving adjustments on both sides. It cannot simply be mandated by Government, Government can act as a catalyst to enable and fund a policy approach but unless we have the support of society as a whole and work in partnership with civic society and community organisations, integration and interculturalism will remain a paper-based aspiration.

Leadership is actively, and constantly, needed to challenge xenophobic tendencies when new issues arise which scapegoat or blame migrants, or begrudge them benefits to which they are entitled. The media also has a key role in handling ethnic tensions in their reportage.

Justice & Policy

Getting the right policy inevitably means change. To date, most Government attention has been focused quite properly on the immediate issues associated with asylum seekers, as they are our most vulnerable group of newcomers. However, as it becomes clearer that Ireland is facing a much different set of circumstances we must adjust our policy accordingly.

Figures for asylum seekers have diminished considerably now that we have a fair and independent system for processing claims quickly. Economic migration must now be the main focus.

While the Department of Justice has the traditional role and responsibility of border control - that is predominantly a security function. Working to positively welcome and integrate people who migrate legally here for work, and who we desperately need, takes a completely different mindset and maybe even Department. We have to be sure that two necessary but quite different functions are not inadvertently, confused or at cross-purposes.

Citizenship For Inclusion

My final point relates to citizenship. Research shows that citizenship can act as a tool for inclusion or a tool for exclusion when it comes to cultural and ethnic diversity. We must make sure Irish citizenship is the former. Increasing appropriately the access to citizenship or to long-term residency can demonstrate a mature and nuanced policy-approach to diversity. Something Ireland is increasingly recognised for.

We should begin to look at both symbolic and legal entitlement of citizenship- at the duties and rights - at the reassurance of residence it can provide, the greater access to services and the right to vote in certain elections it can afford - look at all of these in a way that does justice to Ireland and our values as a progressive, modern republic. I welcome that Fine Gael has joined in that debate.

Next Steps

Our annual conference is an opportunity to apply our policy approach to a range of areas. As a Party we should consider what our objective really is. I see integration for interculturalism as the superior choice for Irish old and new. To successfully delivery this choice will require political support and leadership at the highest level. A dedicated unit in the Department of the Taoiseach, and even a Minister of State could perhaps be given responsibility for integration across all of the relevant Departments and Agencies.

I intend in the autumn to host a half-day conference, where the Party can facilitate a debate on integration policy in Ireland - perhaps the major social challenge facing us today.

We can learn from the lessons of others and draw on the best practices elsewhere. But we can also bring our own experiences to bear on this topic. Progressive politics is essentially about the future.

This Party have played a huge part in shaping modern Ireland - in driving the economic prosperity which pulls newcomers to our shores to participate in our growth. It follows, therefore, that we have a major responsibility to avoid the mistakes of other countries who failed in this area.