

Speech by Liz O'Donnell at National Conference Wexford

17th February 2007

New Challenges, New Solutions Session



Good morning delegates and all those watching at home.

Welcome to the Progressive Democrats National Conference here in Whites Hotel in Wexford for the first time.

We have an exciting and changed format for our Conference this year. After 9 years in Government it's tempting to dine out on our achievements as a party in government. But, in this election year, we have to resist that temptation and explore together the future agenda. Politics is essentially about the future.

When we started out 9 years ago our tasks were different. The landscape was different but no less challenging than today's.

High unemployment, monopolies, high insurance costs – a moribund peace process.

Systematically we navigated our way over obstacles towards solutions taking on all comers in the confident knowledge that our agreed Programme with Fianna Fáil was the vehicle for good governance over the last 9 years.

Our low tax, pro-enterprise approach has resulted in the creation of 600,000 jobs in that period. Delegates we have ploughed all the fruits of increased tax revenues to improving our public services tackling poverty and exclusion and supports for the elderly and the disabled. We hold to our credo that the best poverty beater is a real job; that if Government policies are correctly framed to incentivise enterprise and work, that dynamic will unleash the talents of our people to create wealth.

After nine years, the protracted vexed quarrel in Northern Ireland has at long last been resolved. And we stand at the dawn of a welcome normalisation of politics in Northern Ireland and the final implementation of all aspects of the Good Friday Agreement.

People may bemoan the fact that it has taken so long to get to this point. But when you think about the scale, scope and radical nature of the political settlement involved – essentially the reframing of Northern Irish society in terms of security, policing justice and equality – it was always going to be a protracted business. Not for the fainthearted. Trust as between those who will share power has been slow to take hold but is at least now in our sights. And I wish them all well. The people of Northern Ireland deserve a new political landscape of opportunity and prosperity.

But, perhaps the biggest change in the last ten years has been the move from mass emigration and all the despair it created, to net inward migration for the first time in our history. But we have had very little time to plan to provide for the needs of our new arrivals. 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. Currently migrants contribute 10% of our population.

So while in the 1980's the challenge was in staunching the drain of emigration. Today our challenge is integrating the new arrivals who we desperately need in our economy. Delegates, this is all good news!

As I said last year there is no downside economically or socially. If there is, it will be because of a failure of policy and a failure of governance.

So what is integration? Is it assimilation? *When in Ireland, do as the Irish do-* the *like it or lump it* approach? This largely discredited approach.

Our own history of mass emigration calls for a more progressive and humane approach. Making a life in a foreign land has been the persistent lot for generations of Irish since the great famine as our people fled a place devoid of opportunity.

That race memory of finding opportunity abroad should and I think does inform our approach. Good outcomes will not happen by chance. We can also learn from the mistakes of others.

Our instinct would suggest that either segregation or assimilation are the way forward for us.

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.

Against our robust framework of anti discrimination laws we should encourage a process of mutual respect and adjustment. Encouraging newcomers to understand and accept basic Irish values and for Irish people to respect the cultural differences newcomers bring to Ireland.

So, rather than expecting newcomers to abandon their cultures, the emphasis must be on celebrating difference in a culturally diverse society. This is a truly interculturalist approach.

And this is a two way process requiring 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 the support of society as a whole and is vital.

My concern for some time has been the traditional role and responsibility of the Department of Justice in these matters. Border control is primarily a security function. Integration is a completely distinct concept and function. If we are to positively welcome, and ensure fair and equal treatment for economic migrants we need a completely different mindset. And perhaps even Department. I believe equality and security functions should be separated.

In this regard I am pleased that over the weekend we will explore a Progressive Democrat proposal to bring this about.

So, as we survey the landscape ahead in 2007 what are the other critical challenges facing Ireland? A rising population placing strains on our services and infrastructure; - job losses linked to global shocks or rising labour costs in our highly globalised economy?

- Keeping Ireland competitive;
- Completing the massive job of reform in the Health Services;
- Tackling organised crime;
- Global warming and Ireland's traffic congestion.

Much of these are provided for in fiscal terms in the National Development Plan. But it's the detail, the priorities, the approach that makes the difference. What do we PD's have to say on this vast array of challenges?

What is the Progressive Democrats take on;

- Rural planning;
- Education;
- Immigration;
- Transport;
- Town planning;
- Energy.

This session will deal with all of these, culminating with a keynote speech by Minister Mary Harney on the economy and society.

In all of this, we are positive as a party. We have no time for the negativity of others when it comes to Ireland. Our people are our premium resource.

We believe in wealth creation and in individual freedom. We hold firm to our credo of encouraging enterprise and in maximising opportunities for our young and increasingly diverse population.

Unlike others we are consistent. We take pride in Progressive Liberal Politics, which protects the weak, and motivates workers and business people.

We are free and unencumbered when it comes to vested interests. Our only interest is the Public interest and in providing top quality services for our people.

The job of Government is to make policy to ensure we are resilient, competitive, confident and secure. As a small open economy we must never become complacent.

Good, wise government will stand between us and the severest negative consequences of an economic downturn.

That is why the outcome of the next election is so pivotal to Ireland. In all areas including politics, competition is good creating choice for consumers and citizens. There is a clear choice at the next election. More of the same, or an untested diverse coalition?

Politicians can be divided into two types. There are those who thrive on grievance; who were happier (to use a new leftwing buzzword) where we were poor and discontent gave them a *raison d'être*.

There are others like Progressive Democrats who when faced with problems rolls their sleeves up and find solutions.

- We get things done.
- We don't ask people are they happy.
- We get on with solving problems and overcoming challenges.

But to do all this we need to elect TD's in Dáil Éireann. I am delighted that so many of our candidates are contributing this morning to this session and let's start with welcoming our new candidate for Dublin North East, Keith Redmond.