

# TAKING FINE GAEL FORWARD

*How to Energise Fine Gael*



**LEO**  
**Varadkar**

COURAGE  
TO TAKE US  
FORWARD



# FOREWORD

Fine Gael is a great party. We can be proud of our history and our achievements. We founded the State a century ago, successfully established and secured its institutions, oversaw many crucial advances in our economic and social policy, and were called upon again to save our country during our recent, darkest crisis.

I want to lead Fine Gael for two reasons:

*I want  
to take our  
country  
forward.*

*I want to  
make  
Fine Gael  
a fighting  
force again.*

Fine Gael is the party of ambition. The party that will see to it that everybody gets a fair go and that there is a threshold of decency below which nobody is allowed to fall. But more than that, we are the party of aspiration that wants to enable people, families, communities, and businesses to be as successful as they can, believes nobody should be left behind and nobody should be held back. We are the party that represents those who get up early in the morning, work hard, respect the law, and want more for their children and their community.

As Taoiseach and Party Leader, my purpose would be to see our country modernised and transformed. The politics that I believe in is the politics of opportunity.

I believe in a country with a strong enterprise economy made prosperous by what we produce and the services

we provide, rather than an economy based on speculation. I believe in a country with sound public finances and prudent balanced budgets, where work, talent and inventiveness are rewarded and personal freedom and liberty are respected. I believe in safe streets and communities, and respect for the law.

I believe in the contributory principle that everyone should make a contribution to the State in the knowledge that the State will be there for them when they need a safety-net and for when they grow old. I believe that welfare should be a second chance, not a way of life.

I believe in an Ireland that is confident about its place in the world, connected to its diaspora and at home at the heart of Europe. I believe in a genuinely united Ireland, not one that is divided between rural and urban, north and south, but one that benefits all our citizens and communities.

For the majority of the past decade, unusually in the party's history, we have been in government. This political success has given us the confidence and the courage to be ambitious both for Ireland and for Fine Gael in the time ahead, believing that we can articulate a vision that will resonate with the electorate. However, nothing is certain in politics. We have no right to believe that success is guaranteed. Politics is more volatile than ever. If the right decisions are taken, we can lead this Government and the next. If the wrong decisions are taken, we will be in survival mode.

For parties to survive and prosper they must adapt to the changing political and social environment. That is the challenge facing Fine Gael at this critical juncture.

To fulfil our ambitions for Ireland we must win support from the Irish people. Gaining new support must be a key priority for the new Leader of Fine Gael, for it is only if we garner such support that we can deliver new policies to take Ireland forward. I believe I am best placed to widen the appeal of Fine Gael and extend our support base, by opening up a new conversation with voters who have not traditionally voted for Fine Gael or even thought about it. This includes younger voters, minorities, new citizens and people living in parts of Ireland that feel that they have been left behind. I will also ensure that Fine Gael remains true to its values and principles going back to the foundation of the State.

Fine Gael should be a party that can attract votes in Castleknock and Clondalkin, Dungarvan and Doohoma, not because we are all things to all people but because there are people in all areas and all walks of life who share our values.



Electing me will pass the baton of power and responsibility to a new generation of politician, to a new style of politics and a new vision for Ireland.

The challenge now is to provide good government while at the same time preparing for the next general election. We also need to reinvigorate our membership and reach out to potential new supporters.

Being a member of Fine Gael must be meaningful. People who pay the membership fee should feel that they are getting something for it. Namely, a real input into politics. Members and supporters should have a greater role in our discussions and decisions. As a Young Fine Gael member, I led the charge to give party members a say in who leads the party and won the debate about it on the floor of the Ard Fheis. It would be a great honour to be the first Leader elected with this enhanced mandate.

You, as a Fine Gael member, are the party's greatest resource. Too often, members feel used and abused, there for door knocking or fundraising, but ignored when big decisions are taken. **THAT'S GOING TO CHANGE.** We have within our party competent and capable people who joined to make a difference and who believe in Fine Gael's values and policies. The exact same applies to our elected public representatives who are an untapped resource who want to contribute more. Everyone's voice needs to be heard and respected.

I see three fundamental issues that have to be tackled.

- **The party has become over-centralised in its decision making.** Too many decisions are taken by the leadership, decisions that could be taken at more appropriate levels within the party and especially within the Parliamentary Party.

Since the 1980s there has been a slow but steady move towards centralisation and many of us in Fine Gael do not like that. The Party Leader must be fully briefed and aware of developments internally and the decisions taken, but it is not necessary that those decisions must always have their prior approval.

Political parties are always in danger of becoming too centralised and subject to the control of a small leadership team. I want to liberate Fine Gael and unleash the enormous talent and ability available to us from across the party: parliamentarians, councillors, the membership, and YFG.

- I want to make a **genuine effort to include our members and elected public representatives in the work of policy formation and campaigns.** Too often positions are handed down from on high with no formal consultation or discussion with party members. A message cannot be sold or understood unless there is ownership. Fine Gael members want something more to their involvement with the party. They want to be included in policy-making,

not taken for granted. Under my leadership, public representatives and members will never again be taken for granted.

- We have to **renew our support base and build up our membership.** I passionately want to engage with more people from all backgrounds, urban and rural, young and old, making our party the most representative, most open party in Ireland, as well as the largest. Fine Gael should be a reflection of modern Ireland; we should make a greater effort to welcome more young people, women, people from disadvantaged backgrounds and new citizens. I will make Fine Gael more diverse and will ensure our party is seen by the public as the party that understands the changes that are evident all across Ireland.

We can ignite the party by actions in three key areas:

- we can **democratise** the party;
- we can **engage** our members, tapping into their collective imagination and talents to surface new thinking and evolve a new political agenda; and
- we can **organise and mobilise** to connect with a wider public, to listen intently to their interests, concerns, and views, and to secure their confidence and support.

I intend that the **Deputy Leader of the Party** will have responsibility for driving forward the implementation of the party reform agenda set out in this document.



# DEMOCRATISE THE PARTY

## LETTING MEMBERS DECIDE

I believe that the formal decision for Fine Gael to enter government should be made by the party as a whole, as is the case in other parties. If it is proposed to enter government after the next election, I will hold a special conference of the party to approve any new Programme for Government. Delegates will include all elected public representatives, as well as delegates from each constituency. The Executive Council will be mandated to produce a detailed proposal to enable this within six months.

The committee will include representation from the Oireachtas, European Parliament, local authorities and membership, in addition to a small number of outside experts and advisers. Public submissions will be sought and the committee will be empowered to hold hearings.

## ANNUAL ARD FHEIS AND ANNUAL POLICY CONFERENCE

There will be an Ard Fheis every year. Every second year shall be an 'electing Ard Fheis' at which the President, Vice-Presidents and Executive Council are elected. The Ard Fheis has become far too managed, staged and sterile. We should not be afraid of good debates, opposing views and open votes. We need fewer motions and more debates on the big issues.

I am also proposing that every year all elected public representatives: Councillors, TDs, Senators, and MEPs, will meet at an Annual Policy Conference. A delegation from each constituency (two per Dail seat) will also attend the Conference.

The objective of this Annual Policy Conference will solely be policy. It will involve preparing policy positions and updating the party's Political Programme. We have to harness the talents that exist throughout the entire party. By including all levels in policy development, more people will be involved in shaping our policy platform development and our message, ensuring it is disseminated effectively.

## STRENGTHEN THE LINKS BETWEEN THE PARTY IN GOVERNMENT AND THE PARLIAMENTARY PARTY

The Parliamentary Party Chairperson will attend the weekly pre-Cabinet meeting of Fine Gael Ministers to ensure greater input by the Parliamentary Party into Fine Gael's decision making in Government.

## SHAPING A DYNAMIC POLITICAL PROGRAMME

Party manifestos as currently constituted have long since outlived their usefulness. Only a small number of people have a meaningful input into the manifesto and as it is published during the Election Campaign, it already is too late to convince the public of the merit of the ideas and policies contained therein. I will replace the manifesto with a rolling 'Political Programme' that details Fine Gael's position on the key issues of the day. I will appoint a committee to draw up a first draft which can be adopted at the Ard Fheis and amended at subsequent ones.



# ENGAGE OUR MEMBERS

## NEW GROUPINGS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

More and more, people organise their lives around interest or affinity networks rather than where they live at a given point in time. However, our organisation is still based around parish branches.

Where there is interest, we need to establish on-line affinity groups and social networks, for example: FG SME Group; FG Young Farmers; FG Inclusion; FG Environment Group; FG Lawyers; FG LGBT Group; FG Education Group; FG Gaeilge Group; FG Young Professionals' Network; FG Campaign for the Arts. These groups will be encouraged to hold events different to the usual top-table and chairs meetings that take a whole evening. This could include seminars, networking events after work, breakfast briefings, etc. This will be resourced from Fine Gael Headquarters and to start the process, at least one new network will be established every quarter.

## TAPPING INTO THE TALENTS AND EXPERIENCES OF MEMBERS

Within 12 months, our membership database will be totally overhauled and updated. We will gather full contact details for members: addresses, phone numbers and e-mail

addresses as appropriate. We will also have a better profile of our members including their interests and occupation as well as qualifications and skills that they would be willing to put at the party's disposal. This will be project managed by Headquarters.

We have so many members with knowledge and skills that they want to make available to Ministers and the party generally such as policy expertise, fundraising, public relations, recruitment and management. But we do not know who they are, and when they offer their services we have no organised means to avail of them. We need to harness this latent resource.

## SUMMER SCHOOL - CREATING NEW CONNECTIONS, NEW THINKING

Fine Gael shall organise an annual Griffith-Collins Summer School. This will be open to members and non-members who want to discuss new ideas, with international speakers and European Peoples Party (EPP) colleagues. It will be held over a weekend outside of Dublin with the first one being held in Cork this August to coincide with the Béal na Bláth Collins commemoration.



# ORGANISE AND MOBILISE

## ESTABLISH A LOCAL AND EUROPEAN ELECTIONS DEPARTMENT WITHIN THE PARTY

The party has considerable strengths around the country in organising campaigns and winning elections. We need to resource and prioritise funding for a new Local and European Elections Department, operating at Headquarters level. We need to spend more on ongoing campaigns and supporting candidates. We need to establish and resource local Fine Gael offices in counties and constituencies in which we have no seat.

It is crucial that we prepare properly for the 2019 Local and European Elections. Success in these elections is often followed by success in general elections while the reverse is true also. The party needs to have clear targets for each local authority. The work needs to begin now: resolving organisational weaknesses, identifying candidates and ensuring they are well-placed to be elected.

I do not support an early general election but I do want Fine Gael to be ready whenever it comes over the next four years. Our members and elected public representatives expect us to be ready without any delay. This will not distract from the important work of Government but rather ensure that when the time comes, we campaign in the best possible way with innovative ideas and energy.



## PARTY GENERAL SECRETARY

In line with modern practice for company Chief Executive Officers and Government Department Secretary Generals, the next General Secretary, when the positions falls to be appointed, will serve a maximum term of 5 to 7 years.

## COUNTIES AND CONSTITUENCIES CURRENTLY WITH NO TD

I will ensure that there is a specific plan for each such county and constituency. In some places plans are already in place and these need to be implemented without delay.

We need to open and resource Fine Gael offices and campaigns in these places. Local area representatives will be appointed in population centres currently without Fine Gael representation to build the visibility and awareness of Fine Gael and its policies in these communities. There should be a full day visit by the Taoiseach/Party Leader to each of these constituencies and Ministerial/Spokespersons visits shall also be arranged.

## CONVENTIONS - EARLY, OPEN AND FAIR

Once the Boundary Commission issues its report, we will start holding conventions. They will be open, well organised and scrutinised to ensure that they are fair and that procedures are followed, and that the outcome cannot be successfully challenged in the courts.

I will request the Executive Council to prepare proposals within 10 weeks for the enhancement of the rules and procedures concerning conventions. A dispute resolution process will be established as a forum where concerns on the running of a convention or other matters can be dealt with in a timely manner. This will help minimise rancour and reduce the danger of matters being unresolved or being settled in the courts.

## SUB-CONSTITUENCY ORGANISATION

Fine Gael is not best organised below constituency level. Some constituencies have strong branches, others operate on a district basis. In others, it is a mix and in more, it is entirely ad hoc. There are too many meetings with small numbers of people and Fine Gael as an organisation spends far too much time meeting itself.

The Executive Council, with the assistance of outside expertise, will carry out a total review of the organisational structures and recommend how best to proceed. It may be that one size does not fit all, and some constituencies may



move to district structures with no branches while others will retain branches with districts only meeting for the purpose of the local elections.

## DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Ireland is a modern multi-cultural country. Fine Gael's decision to amend the electoral law to have more women candidates standing at general elections for all parties is working. Having a Parliamentary Party more representative of the country we live in is the right way to go. Political parties can serve an important function in integrating new communities into Irish life. Fine Gael must have a clear ambition to reflect in its membership the totality of Irish society.

We need to ensure that we organise our meetings in locations which are accessible to people with disabilities.

We need to apply a new approach when it comes to encouraging new citizens to stand as Fine Gael candidates. It requires work and resources. Much more can be done to support new candidates. Candidate training and support works and we need to extend it.

## RECRUITMENT DRIVE

Fine Gael needs a national recruitment drive to expand its membership, particularly in cities and towns. The campaign to recruit new members will be a mixture of social media and traditional town hall meetings. We will allow people who do not wish to become full members to register as supporters. They will receive communications, be invited to participate in campaigns but will not have full membership rights.

## YOUNG FINE GAEL (YFG)

YFG has a vital role to play in the party. YFG is a source of new members; these members bring fresh thinking and

new ideas. YFG also has a vital role in visible political campaigning both on the streets and in social media.

Central to the development of a revitalised and modern Fine Gael is a strong YFG. I will engage with the leadership of YFG to explore how best the party can assist the development of the organization.

I want to ensure that YFG's ideas are heard and listened to at Party Leadership level and that of Government. Bilaterals, to be known as the FitzGerald Process, will be organised between Fine Gael Ministers/spokespersons and YFG to ensure that this two-way dialogue is put in place. Members of YFG need to know that their views and honest opinions are valued and will be listened to.

## DEEPEN OUR ENGAGEMENT WITH THE EUROPEAN PEOPLES PARTY (EPP)

Fine Gael is a long-standing and active member of the EPP. It is more than a parliamentary group, it is a pan-European party. The knowledge and relationships we have built up through our membership has brought benefits to Fine Gael and to Ireland.

We will deepen our engagement further with a particular focus on extending involvement beyond Ministers, MEPs and members of the Committee of the Regions, to the wider Parliamentary Party, councillors and membership. This should involve regular bilateral exchanges between Fine Gael and other EPP sister parties, attending each other's party conferences and greater use of EPP branding in Ireland.

## DEVELOP LINKS ACROSS THE BORDER

Ministers are very engaged with Northern Ireland through their work on the North-South Ministerial Council as are many TDs through the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. This needs to be replicated at all levels in the party. This

will be done through greater engagement with political parties in the North in the form of a structured programme of study visits, exchange of expertise, secondments, and attendance at party conferences.

## FORMER OIREACHTAS MEMBERS

Former Oireachtas members possess enormous expertise, corporate memory, and extensive networks. They are forgotten too quickly and are allowed to drift away.

A Fine Gael former Oireachtas members' group, the Cosgrave Society, will be established with administrative support in Headquarters. Members will be asked to mentor candidates and up-and-coming talent, and assist Ministers and constituencies.

## INTERN PROGRAMME

We shall establish an intern programme for Fine Gael with placement in Headquarters and constituency offices. Internships are an excellent opportunity for people to develop new skills, to bring on new talent, cross-fertilise and expose more members to the real everyday work of the party and politicians. Applications will be centrally co-ordinated and the programme will incorporate training. We will investigate the possibility of including the European Peoples Party (EPP) or our sister parties within the EPP in such a programme.

## EDUCATION AND INFORMATION DEPARTMENT

Fine Gael will establish an Education and Information Department offering courses to party members, candidates and public representatives on politics, public relations and media, party and political history, legislative affairs and economics. This will better equip future candidates and future staff to succeed in their roles.

## RECLAIMING OUR HISTORY

In Fine Gael we are rightly proud of our history. As the decade of commemorations moves into the centenary of the establishment of Dáil Éireann, the War of Independence, the Civil War and the foundation of the State, we have a wonderful opportunity to reclaim our history as a party. This should include greater participation in commemorations, both those already in place and others that may be developed, celebrating the contribution of Collins, Cosgrave, O'Higgins, Griffith, FitzGerald and MacEoin among others. We should celebrate with special events those important anniversaries such as the foundation of the State, the contribution of Cumann na nGaedheal, the creation of the Fine Gael party and the declaration of a Republic.

We should bring back into use the term 'United Ireland Party' as a tag line for our party. This should refer to our aspirations for the whole island, not just north and south but also rural and urban, young and old, so that it is clear that Fine Gael is the party for everyone and which will build on its distinguished past to deliver a better future.

