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Speech by the Taoiseach Mr Albert Reynolds TD,
at a Fianna Fáil By-Election Convention,
Dublin South-Central, Sunday, 10 April at 5.30 p.m.

The late Tip O'Neill used to give all politicians a valuable piece of advice, "Look after your own backyard", he would tell them. "Get home often, report to your constituents, keep them informed, and they will trust you, and help you with your work as a national politician". That was what he meant by his famous expression: "All politics is local".

Over the years, two Fianna Fáil Deputies, Ben Briscoe and Dr. John O'Connell, never neglected their own backyard. And in turn, the people in Dublin South-Central enabled these hardworking and popular deputies to produce results which have improved people's lives. Today, we are selecting someone who will carry on that fine tradition of service.

It will be carried on in a positive climate.

Our economy has turned a difficult corner, and is now poised to forge ahead. Consumer confidence is growing. There are positive trends on the employment front.

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People have extra spending power since the tax burden was lightened in the Budget, and spending is once more, on the increase. The new Programme for Competitiveness and Work with the trade unions and other social partners should assist our effort to boost jobs. In the next few weeks, we expect the National Development Plan to be approved by the European Commission - this will also boost job creation.

Over the last 8 years, Fianna Fáil has helped to deliver positive and sustained economic growth - even during a severe international recession. This contrasts starkly with the failed economic management, of others during much of the 1980s, which produced only stagnation, while doubling the national debt. We have transformed the weakest economic performance in Europe into one of the strongest. For the eighth year running, the Budget is on target, as the Exchequer returns showed last Thursday.

Growth of 4 to 5% can be expected this year and next year, which will make a real impact on jobs. We will be back to the strong growth of 1989-90. This was mainly responsible for the net rise in employment of 56,000, since Fianna Fáil returned to Government, wiping out similar losses in the first half of the 1980s. Interest rates are at their lowest level since the 1970s. Our inflation is the lowest in Europe, and has for several years now, been lower than at any time since the 1950s. This Partnership Government is working well as a cohesive management team. The success of that team is now beginning to show. All commentators agree that the economy is now ready for take-off, and that is a reflection of the success of the team over the last 15 months.

Unemployment reached its highest peak in January 1993, the month that the present Partnership Government took office. Now, it is set on a definite declining trend, a fact which is reflected in each new set of monthly figures.

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This year should see us break all previous records in terms of the total numbers at work, to well over eleven hundred and sixty thousand (1,160,000), with an anticipated rise of 21,000 in 1994, following the Budget.

While the labour force continues to grow, slowing the fall in unemployment, we can expect the number of net additional jobs to grow quite rapidly. New jobs should emerge in small firms, an area we focused on strongly in this year's Budget.

We are generating a buoyant inflow of overseas investment at the present time, especially from America. The IDA is having one of its best ever years in that market.

Our decision to allow direct transatlantic flights into Dublin should also generate a buoyant inflow of tourists, with obvious benefit for the Dublin area, among others. The number of overseas visitors grew last year by a further 6.5%. This continues the strong growth trend of the recent past, and I am hopeful that this year we may double the number of overseas visitors since 1986.

In the last few years, Dublin has been re-born. A recent survey published in the Financial Times showed that in the 1990's Dublin would be the second fastest growing city in Europe after Barcelona. We can make Dublin into one of the finest capitals in Europe.

Substantial levels of EC Structural funding will go into improving facilities. The building of Tallaght Hospital has started, as I said it would during the last General Election. Improvement will be specially focused on roads and transport. The new ring road will take a lot of the traffic out of places like Crumlin and Terenure. The light rail system out to Dundrum and Tallaght will also relieve the traffic situation in the South city.

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We need modern, efficient transport companies with a motivated workforce, that can make good use of scarce investment resources, and that provide a reliable and dependable service to the customer. The Irish railways have one of the best industrial relations records up until now. In today's competitive world, industrial action in defence of outdated practices is often suicidal, and puts jobs and investment at risk.

Over the past decade, we have put nearly £1 billion into maintaining and improving the railway, when some economists have been telling us that we should run it down. We are now proposing major new investment of about £230m. Those who work in Irish Rail should realise they have the most public transport friendly Government in a long time. They must find a way of sorting out their differences, that does not involve disruption to the public.

We are committed to developing and renewing the inner city, the appearance of which is steadily improving. We have put Dublin on the world's financial map. We have created a new cultural quarter in Temple Bar. We have improved facilities in town centres in the suburbs and the new towns. In the past few years, Fianna Fáil has given a tremendous lift to Dublin, while remaining equally committed to balanced regional development. With Fianna Fáil in Government, Dublin will continue to thrive. We are making it a capital city of which we can all be justly proud.

There has been much artificial controversy over European Structural Funding. The fact is that we have negotiated sums in Europe, which would have been inconceivable a few years ago. Whatever criticisms people may have over the tactics, tough negotiation is required to achieve the best results.

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The results we have achieved are better than those achieved by any other Member State. What our critics are criticising is, in fact, the biggest inflow of funding for the economy, in the history of the State. In European terms, Structural and Cohesion Funding greatly exceeds even the volume of Marshall Aid after the war. It is a unique opportunity, and we are determined to make the best use of it.

Far from having further difficulties in Brussels, the negotiation of the National Development Plan is nearly complete. It is the most comprehensive and ambitious investment plan ever seen in this country. All the major schemes are going ahead. It will enable us to continue the process of catching up rapidly with our European partners.

Our average income per head has risen from 60% of the European Union average in 1986 to 74% today. There has been a steady rise in incomes for virtually all sections of the community over the past 8 years - this contrasts with the fall in living standards between 1982 and 1987. We have already reduced income tax rates substantially. Now, we are concentrating on widening the standard rate band and removing low-income families out of the tax net altogether. Many people should notice a significant difference in their weekly pay this month, compared to this time last year unlike the marginal adjustments all too familiar from a few years ago. Once again Opposition parties, including Democratic Left, have failed to see the wood from the trees.

With a steady improvement in the public finances and strong economic growth, Fianna Fáil's long-term aim is to make Ireland once again the low-tax economy it was until the end of the 1960s, without damaging the quality of necessary public services.

Fianna Fáil are determined to improve the safety of people on the streets and in their homes.

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The criminal will be confronted, and taken off the streets. We have a programme to recruit 1,000 new Gardaí. We are providing additional prison accommodation. There are new powers to prevent people being harassed and intimidated by roaming groups on the street. The scourge of drug abuse is an area we are working particularly hard on. The drugs culture is pernicious and subversive. It is the root cause of a range of other crimes, and has a destabilising effect on society. Legislation is being put through to confiscate the proceeds of crime from drug barons and other criminals. The Gardaí have also taken important initiatives to tackle the problem, which have been very successful.

Legislation controlling videos, parts of which are already in force, will be brought into full effect. Recent research in Britain confirms our long-held conviction that in certain circumstances video nasties can contribute to criminal behaviour.

Peace in Northern Ireland would contribute both to lower crime levels and to increased investment and employment. The Government will continue to work very hard for a complete cessation of violence, and to liberate the communities in the North from the fear and the tragedy of the last 25 years.

The opportunity to make real progress requires a much longer cessation of violence than we had this week. But, however trying the delays, we have to show patience for peace.

We must try all avenues. We must not close doors. The people throughout this island want peace now and not later. They also want justice, and they want realism. They are as determined as I am to release them from this seemingly never-ending cycle of violence. The search for peace will continue and will succeed in the end.

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There are those, who claim that we have wasted too much time in the search for peace, and also suggest that we should write off the efforts of the last two years. I have no intention of doing that. We have created an historic opportunity which remains. The momentum for peace must be maintained, not slackened and no-one should under-estimate people-power, as they continue the momentum for peace with justice.

The battle to establish and gain acceptance for the principle, that democratic constitutional politics will alone determine the political future on this island is not an irrelevant sideshow. It is, in fact, the central political issue. Resumption of the talks process, for which we are working, would underline the support of all other parties for the democratic way forward.

Fianna Fáil are engaged in important work in Government. We are making real progress. We are trying to achieve major breakthroughs on some of the most fundamental problems facing us. We look with confidence for the support of the people of Dublin South-Central for the constructive policies and the proven track-record that Fianna Fáil can offer.