May 2002 General election special

For this issue, each of the parliamentary parties was asked to submit 250 words in response to five key questions.

The Taoiseach writes
The Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern TD, contributes a special article committing the government to a series of stepped targets and actions to end homelessness.

Fine Gael will consider fresh legislation
The Fine Gael party says that it will consider legislation for a right to accommodation for every citizen; and set a target of not more than 100 people in Dublin dependant on emergency accommodation.

Housing is a right
Sinn Fein says there should be a right to housing in the constitution. The party aims to reduce homelessness by 70% in 2 years.

Greens: beef up the Homeless Agency
The Green Party wants €15m guaranteed to the Homeless Agency so that it can meet the needs of the homeless, with reports on progress made to an Oireachtas committee every six months.

Housing: one of our pledges
The Labour Party outlines six specific actions it will take on homelessness and housing policy - one of its 6 election pledges.

Practical proposals
The Progressive Democrats set out a set of targets and practical proposals.

These stories shortly. But first...

Simon Makes Homeless Crisis an election Issue
The Simon Communities of Ireland have targeted each of the current parliamentary political parties to put the homeless crisis on the agenda for the general election. Simon’s campaign seeks real answers from each party on their priorities for homeless people. This enables Simon community members and supporters to analyze what each party is prepared to do. Simon aims to ensure that tackling homelessness becomes a priority for whoever forms the next government.

Simon has highlighted five priority areas where specific commitments are sought from each party. Their responses are in this special edition of Simon News. The five priority areas are:

• Legislative right to housing
• Specific targets for the reduction of the overall numbers of people homeless.
• Full implementation of the government policy “Homelessness – an integrated strategy”
• Specific actions on youth homelessness, and
• Measures to address the growing mental health needs of homeless people.

Simon started its general election campaign with a public debate between each of the party spokespersons and Simon residents, staff and volunteers. The anger and frustration felt by workers and residents was not lost on the politicians who participated.

Simon has also issued special election leaflets for all members and supporters suggesting questions to ask candidates when they are canvassing for your vote. (copies available from the Federation office).

Ending the current homeless crisis will require a real political commitment for change. Simon calls on all its supporters to make the homeless crisis an election issue.

**Fine Gael will Consider Fresh Legislation**

Olivia Mitchell writes: Fine Gael believes that every citizen has a right to accommodation which is appropriate to their needs. This premise underpins our recently published housing manifesto, ‘Just Housing’, which commits to making this aspiration a reality for everyone. In government, Fine Gael will consider legislation to underpin this right. However, we are conscious that putting rights on a statutory basis doesn't necessarily make things happen and that overcoming barriers to delivery of housing is the key issue requiring political action.

While the full up to date figures on the numbers of homeless will not be available for some months, Fine Gael would have a target of no more than 100 people in Dublin depending on emergency hostel accommodation. The housing market is a seamless one and the homeless problem stems primarily from the overall shortage of accommodation including appropriate supported accommodation. Fine Gael will increase the absolute numbers of accommodation units with support facilities through the involvement of voluntary housing associations. Access to mental health care, social services and job training would be part of the on site support facilities. This is a key preventative measure, which is required in addition to the preventative measures recommended in the strategy dealing with those being released from custodial or health care facilities. Fine Gael is fully committed to the implementation of the homeless strategies including the targets being set in the action plans to give effect to the youth homelessness strategy. Progress will be monitored on a regular basis to ensure targets are kept and specifically to identify structural, administrative or funding barriers to delivery.

**Sinn Fein: Housing is a Right**

Housing is a right which should be enshrined in the constitution. We have a housing crisis because the current government regards housing only as a product for sale in the market. The primary measure needed to address the crisis is a real social housing programme led and funded by central government, the local authorities and voluntary housing agencies. We fully support Simon’s demand for the full implementation of an
integrated strategy on homelessness. Specifically, we support the demand that local authority homeless action plans be placed on a statutory basis.

Sinn Féin's key housing demands are for major renewed State investment in a comprehensive social housing programme, with frontloading of funding under the National Development Plan to allow the local authorities to house our citizens; and a target for elimination of waiting lists by local authorities, with an immediate target of 70% of applicant units to be provided with suitable accommodation within two years of their being on the list.

We support Simon's call for specific targets for the reduction of the absolute numbers of homeless people based on 2002 figures. On the basis of equity, this should also aim at 70% reduction within two years. We seek an immediate process of consultation with all the relevant voluntary and statutory agencies to target youth homelessness and to develop and implement an action plan on mental health among homeless people.

**Fianna Fail: An Taoiseach, Berite Ahern TD Writes…**

In our policy ‘Homelessness - An Integrated Strategy’ and the two specific strategies on preventative measures and youth homelessness, we outlined what is the first ever comprehensive approach to homelessness. It is our intention to ensure that all groups and agencies, not just health and local authority bodies in Dublin, play a full role in progressively ending homelessness. These strategies have provided the essential policy basis for ending homelessness and we are fully committed to their implementation.

In terms of preventative measures, it is immediately important to stop the flow of people from State care onto the streets. No person should leave State care into a state of homelessness. We are committed to ensuring that, amongst other measures, no person will leave State care without a post-release care plan and a definite address. The onus must be on the State to ensure that housing is available.

Integrated working is essential, with all groups and agencies committed to working with individuals to deal with their specific needs, such as mental health and helping them to move to appropriate forms of accommodation to achieve maximum independence. We are committed to ensuring that a specific proportion of social housing developments are reserved for homeless people and that settlement supports are expanded significantly. We are committed to implementing our social housing plans, with a record output. We are committed to setting specific social housing and homelessness targets following this year’s detailed surveys of needs - it would be foolish to attempt to make a commitment without knowing the exact scale of the action required. These surveys should be used as a basis for setting a stepped series of targets towards the ending of homelessness in Ireland and we are committed to this.

**Green Party Will Resource Homeless Agency**

The Green Party finds it quite unforgivable that there are up to 6,000 people homeless in Ireland today.

We broadly welcome the establishment of the Homeless Agency, but it is
Under-resourced and must be more accountable. We propose that €15m be Guaranteed in support of the Homeless Agency and to ensure that its recommendations in ‘Shaping the Future’ can be fully implemented. The Homeless Agency should be called before an Oireachtas committee every six months to report on progress and the achievement of targets. Our goal is to increase funding, resources and the speed of response to help local authority homeless action plans.

The common good and the right to a roof over your head take precedence over the rights of private property ownership. If this is deemed unconstitutional, the Green Party will call for a constitutional referendum to enshrine this right. Our other proposals:

- Provision of 1,500 housing units by 2010 be brought forward and supplied by 2007.
- Put local authority homeless action plans on a statutory basis.
- Increase funding for agencies involved in early intervention.
- ‘Youth only’ specialist hostel accommodation.
- Increase numbers of social workers.
- Direct funding into educational programmes to encourage understanding and prevention.
- ‘Addict only’ hostel which would provide the necessary specialist medical supports.
- Proposals in 'Shaping our Future' document put on a statutory basis with support mechanisms and emergency accommodation, including special needs psychiatric services.

PROGRESSIVE DEMOCRATS PROMISE PRACTICAL MEASURES

We take the view that the job of government is to provide social supports and social infrastructure, making the choices and setting priorities according to their democratic mandate. Within that, we see a role for a rights-based approach which would involve the ability of people in need of a particular social service to have their right recognised in a court.

In regard to any particular right that would be recognised in this way, it is essential that there would be practical means to implement that right; otherwise the right would become meaningless. It is important also not to create a charter for lawyers’ fees from a rights-based approach to social policy.

We are prepared to set a target for the provision of housing, building on the record levels of social housing achieved by Bobby Molloy -5,000 local authority houses built or acquired last year, the highest level in 15 years. We will set out specifics in our manifesto shortly.

The Homelessness Strategy was brought forwarded by Bobby Molloy and approved by government. We are committed to implement the actions set out in the Homelessness Strategy.
We are committed under the Health Strategy to significant improvements in mental health services and we will ensure that people who are homeless will be able to benefit from these too.

**ACTION ON HOMELESSNESS IS A KEY COMMITMENT FOR THE LABOUR PARTY**

Labour has made 6 pledges to the public for the election - six specific commitments which will definitely be implemented if Labour is back in government. They are Labour's bottom line for participation in government. One of these is for housing: "a right to good quality secure homes at an affordable price."

This housing pledge includes a commitment for ending homelessness, to a social housing programme to meet the needs of those on housing lists and to legislation to halt the unfair evictions that are leading to homelessness for many individuals and families. Specifically:

1. Labour will seek a constitutional referendum to provide for a constitutional right to housing. This will form part of a new constitutional guarantee of social and economic rights. Legislation will be introduced to strengthen the rights of tenants.

2. Labour's objective is to end homelessness. The 2002 homelessness figures have not yet been published by the present government. We call on the minister to publish these figures before the general election.

3. Labour will fully implement the "Homelessness - an integrated strategy". Key to the implementation of the strategy is the provision of accommodation. We will establish a National Housing Authority to provide the professional and managerial support to ensure that the housing programme is delivered.

4. Labour will pursue an integrated approach to youth homelessness - addressing not only the housing needs of young people, but also the problem of substance abuse and alienation that is contributing to youth homelessness.

5. Labour will work to ensure that the housing needs of persons with mental health problems are met. We also recognise that the fact of homelessness contributes to mental illness. The ending of homelessness is one of Labour's highest priorities.

**Simon News**

Simon News is published four times a year to bring you news and information about the work of the Simon Communities - as well as Simon's opinions on what should be done about the homelessness crisis. Simon Communities of Ireland News is published by:

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