

## Speech

---

# Speech by Tánaiste Micheál Martin at the National Economic Dialogue (NED) 2023

From [Department of Foreign Affairs \(/en/organisation/departments/departments-of-foreign-affairs/\)](/en/organisation/departments/departments-of-foreign-affairs/);

Department of Finance

By: [Minister for Foreign Affairs \(/en/role/6b0fb-minister-for-foreign-affairs/\)](/en/role/6b0fb-minister-for-foreign-affairs/); [Micheál Martin \(/en/biography/36751-micheal-martin/\)](/en/biography/36751-micheal-martin/).

Published on 12 June 2023

Last updated on 12 June 2023

1. [Social and economic progress](#)
2. [Investing in our people](#)
3. [International Ireland](#)
4. [Ireland is a trading nation](#)
5. [De-risking our trade](#)
6. [Decarbonising our economy](#)
7. [All-Island Economy and East – West relations](#)
8. [Conclusion](#)

## Check against delivery

Let me start by welcoming you to this afternoon session of the National Economic Dialogue.

I want to thank and acknowledge our Chair, Professor Carol Newman, for her facilitation of this dialogue. And I want to thank you all for making the time to be here and to participate in the discussions.

I know that most of the organisations here today are eager to contribute to a long-term discussion, but also want to be heard on very specific issues. I can assure you that I look forward to reading detailed reports on the different sessions held today and your different proposals for short, medium and long-term actions.

This dialogue is a forum for honest exchanges which acknowledge that this is a modern, complex and international country – a country which has achieved many great things during its independence but must never be complacent.

We must always keep working to acknowledge and address problems. While these are often long-standing, increasingly many are new and were not faced by previous generations.

They are the result of a society which has grown dramatically, a society which is healthier and living longer, and a society which is subject to global events more than at any time in our history.

Internationally, this remains a moment of very grave uncertainty. There is no room for complacency and every reason to show genuine urgency about key challenges.

Many countries are facing recession. The impact of an imperial war of aggression against a democratic state continues to grow. Major price rises are being experienced by every country.

In the face of this, Ireland is again showing sustained economic strength. We have the opportunity to plan for both immediate and long-term challenges.

This didn't happen by chance, it emerged because of core foundations which were put in place by a previous generation of leaders and which have been built on since then.

The three core elements of this have been linking social and economic progress, investment in our people and our openness to the world.

I believe that they are as relevant today as they have ever been.

# Social and economic progress

Seán Lemass' vision for transforming Ireland started with the powerful idea that sustained progress must show the direct link between both economic and social gains. He rightly saw the failure of short-termism.

He believed in the value of dialogue and partnership in order to break the destructive cycle of every group only promoting their own interests.

A century after our independence, and half-a century after our decision to join the now European Union, we have not only built a world-leading economy we have achieved general levels of social progress.

This would have been impossible if we had tried to implement one of the ideologies of the hard left or hard right seen elsewhere.

And while we have nothing to be complacent about, and we have many real issues to overcome, by every reasonable measure we have achieved sustained social and economic progress.

We have shown that you can be both pro-enterprise and pro-social investment. In fact I think that for a country such as Ireland, relatively small and geographically peripheral, there is no other credible way forward.

The strong growth figures and strong budgetary position we are in today cannot be taken for granted and we cannot afford to undermine them with unsustainable policies.

First of all, we need to make sure that we will be in a position to sustain vital public supports and services well into the future.

Minister Michael McGrath talked about this during the morning session, and in particular the work which he has published to use potentially insecure revenues responsibly and to help provide for a population which is living longer.

We also have to make sure that we maintain a secure, sustainable and progressive tax base.

In recent years the government has been clear in implementing both tax and social support policies which are progressive.

These changes have made sure that every section of society benefits – with particular aid going to those most in need.

At a time of rising prices, our approach has been to benefit families widely and progressively.

We have made sure that those who are not in a position to benefit from the strengthening economy are not forgotten, while also introducing changes which have benefitted all whose work sustains our economy.

As we have seen in the past three years, through the pandemic and the major international price rises of the past year, reaching sensible agreements has helped prevent an inflationary spiral, funded direct assistance with key household bills and protected employment.

And even though there have been major economic challenges, including overcoming the fastest impacting recession ever recorded in Europe, the need to use economic progress to fund social progress is something that we have at the core of our programme.

Investment in new health services and tackling the impact of disruption from the pandemic remains a priority.

The economic and social impact of childcare costs is clear, so this year's 25% reduction in these costs is an important move which I want us to build upon.

Today we have the opportunity to put in place secured multi-annual funding to develop critical economic and social infrastructure.

I know that people are often impatient with the pace of progress, but there are few long-term problems which can ever be dealt with through short-term action.

In the vital area of housing, we need more supply and we need more supply of every type of housing.

A new era of social and affordable housing provision is underway. Action is being implemented to significantly increase home building, and measures are being prepared, including taxation measures, to try to both stabilise and expand the private rented

sector.

Our national public transport system is benefiting from significant investment, but again this must go further.

We've seen the very positive impact of lowering public transport prices, and unquestionably, making public transport ever more affordable and more widely available must be part of our wider modernisation agenda.

At the same time, a safe, modern and interconnected road network will also be required irrespective of how successful we are in continuing to expand public transport.

We have to keep looking for new ways of progressing work in these and other areas, including the role of long-term capital funding.

With the budgetary surpluses now on hand, we have to ensure and copper fasten the provision of long term capital investment in key infrastructure projects, which is protected from the ups and downs of the economic cycle.

This can be enabled by creatively using what may be once-off revenues.

We have done this in the past for specific challenges such as building our research and skills base and we should consider doing so again.

---

## Investing in our people

None of our economic success could have been possible without the sustained investment in the skills and education of our people.

I have long believed that the most effective response to systemic poverty is sustained investment in education. It is the great enabler, and the foundation of our nation's economic and social progress.

As we look at how to prepare for the future this area will be as important as ever

As we look at how to prepare for the future this area will be as important as ever.

Some of the biggest employers today are in industries which didn't exist twenty years ago, and many traditional industries have also been transformed. There is no reason to believe that this pace of change will slow down.

So education, training and research in every area will become more and more important.

The introduction of free primary school textbooks from this September is a step towards overcoming an early educational barrier. So too are advances in funding and staffing which are improving the ability of teachers and pupils to interact with each other and to use modern technologies.

The proposal to reform the Senior Cycle is an important part of preparing our young people for the world of today and the decades ahead.

The current approach to the curriculum and assessment has served us well, but it requires continual change.

Because as the world continues to evolve, education must evolve with it.

We need to ensure that key skills of creativity, discovery and reflection are embedded in our system and that the strategic advantage of a strong Irish education system is secured for generations to come.

Twenty four years ago Ireland became the first country in the world to connect all schools to the internet.

We took many steps to broaden engagement with technology and the benefits of this can be seen throughout the country.

With our rising and increasingly diverse population we have to set ourselves the objective of making sure that all communities have modern schools which can maximise learning. And by modern, I mean both core facilities and specialist facilities in areas like science and technology.

I think we have to put in place a medium and long-term funding approach for this which guarantees a strategic implementation of investments and anticipates the needs of years ahead.

---

# International Ireland

When Seán Lemass argued that in order to thrive, Ireland had to become an active member of the international community, he faced many opponents.

Thankfully his views and those of his colleagues prevailed and led to membership of the now European Union fifty years ago.

We are physically an island, but in economic, cultural social and environmental terms we are deeply interlinked with Europe and the wider world.

While other countries talk about turning inwards, we have to double-down on our commitment to Ireland as a strong voice within a strong international community.

We have seen elsewhere the enormous damage which creeping Euroscepticism can cause.

The near pathological inability to acknowledge the unique benefits of the European Union isn't just a debating point – it can have very real-world economic and social implications.

For a sustainable future Ireland needs a strong European Union which has the powers and resources to not just help protect economic progress, but also to protect the democratic values without which progress of any type is not possible.

During the pandemic, our ability to work with the Union was central to being able to secure fast access to vaccines and to coordinate the most complex and threatening public health crisis of recent history.

---

# Ireland is a trading nation

Given the absolutely vital position of our international relations in shaping our future we also need to continue to deepen our diplomatic and general presence internationally.

We have to ensure that other countries not only appreciate our culture but also understand the modern Ireland – an Ireland which is committed to fair trade between countries, strong rules-based international organisations and joint action to tackle critical problems.

In the context of today's discussions I think we need to acknowledge that trade is fundamental to our ability to provide jobs and supports for our people.

Every time we have supported a significant trade deal over the last sixty years we have benefitted. The sustained decline in poverty through many parts of the globe shows us that Free Trade is one of the great developments of recent history.

Yes we must support efforts to address serious issues, especially climate change, in new agreements – but as a country we need to be unequivocal in acknowledging how important trade has been in our development and will be in our future.

We will continue to advocate strongly for a level playing field for global trade and investment.

And we will increase our focus on supply chains and securing Ireland's position in Global Value Chains.

We must also acknowledge the inter-linkages between effectively addressing issues such as cyber security, energy security, the growing web of hybrid threats, and our long-term economic security and prosperity.

And as we've seen through the actions of an increasingly belligerent and authoritarian regime and growing international instability, we have to be mature enough to debate how we work with others to protect essential infrastructure.

We need a wide debate to consider how best to address these issues.

That is why I am convening a national conversation in the form of the Consultative Forum, to examine Ireland's approach to our foreign, security and defence policies.



# De-risking our trade

Every day we see new questions asked about how the general multilateral system will develop and its importance to Ireland.

Ireland shares a common EU desire to build our economic security and to pursue a more level playing field for global trade and investment.

We absolutely do not support the idea of a de-coupled world, with increased polarisation.

However, we strongly support the idea that we have to reduce the potential risks of major disruption.

For Ireland, it means developing our economic and systemic resilience, while protecting our values and interests.

---

# Decarbonising our economy

The existential challenge of climate change is also one which we can only address in cooperation with others – and we have to continue to accelerate this cooperation.

The World Economic Forum recently ranked global risks over the next ten years. The top five risks were all climate-related – failure to mitigate climate change, failure to adapt, natural disasters, biodiversity loss and large-scale involuntary migration.

We can already see the negative impact climate change is having on the world economy.

Closer to home we can see in the loss of biodiversity and extreme weather events that the environment is not an issue for only the few – it impacts on every part of our society and economy.

Ireland has set out an ambitious climate action agenda. This commitment has been enshrined in law.

A growing and trading economy is always going to face tough measures to meet its reasonable commitments to the shared effort of tackling climate change. But we must and we will play our part as a country.

We must not only achieve the targets we have set, we have to do so in a way that brings all parts of our society along. Addressing environmental concerns must be done in a way which is sustainable and fair for all. I have no doubt that we can do this if we are innovative and show good will.

If we can all start from the point of acknowledging the clear scientific consensus that stands behind our goals, then we can have an ongoing debate about measures to achieve those goals.

No one benefits from an inflexible situation where there is a false choice between doing nothing or implementing one specific policy.

For every group that has a concern, or who sees an opportunity, the door is always open for good faith and constructive discussions.

In terms of public investment, we are determined to make this the moment when Ireland began its successful journey to not just tackling the environmental crisis, but also using this action to underpin economic and social progress.

---

## All-Island Economy and East – West relations

Relations within our island and with our nearest neighbour will continue to be central to our future. Continued development of the all-island economy is a key priority which benefits all communities.

We have seen an immense increase in North - South trade over the past twenty-five years. Today, cross-border trade is worth an estimated €9.5 billion.

The all-island economy both supports and is supported by the peace process. It has delivered real benefits and its success should push us to fully realise our shared island's economic potential.

The Shared Island Initiative which I established upon becoming Taoiseach will play an important role in this context.

Through investment in cross border infrastructure, detailed research across the island and a comprehensive programme of structured dialogue, it is about breaking down barriers and bringing people closer together in a meaningful way.

Significant funds from the one billion euro committed to Shared Island have already been allocated, with further developments to be announced in the time ahead.

Specifically on the economy, it is clear to me that people and businesses in Northern Ireland want to make the most of the opportunities the Windsor Framework presents, particularly in light of Northern Ireland's continued access to both the UK internal market and the EU Single Market.

It is critically important that the agreed benchmarks are met and the Framework is implemented fully and in good faith.

Agreement on the Windsor Framework can, I believe, mark the beginning of a new, more cooperative phase in the EU-UK relationship.

---

## Conclusion

We have a strong economy and a strong budget position – but equally we know that there is nothing which we can take for granted.

The opportunity we have is to step back for one moment from the day-to-day news cycle and see that we can, and we must, implement a sustainable approach.

At different moments of great uncertainty since independence, Ireland has progressed when we have had clarity on the core elements of our public policies.

Fundamental to our transformation has been the three elements of linking social and economic progress, investing in our people and being an active participant in the international community.

These are today more important than ever.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

**BETA**

This is a prototype - your feedback will help us to improve it.

**Help us improve gov.ie**

[Leave feedback](#)

## Departments and publications

[Circulars \(/en/circulars/\)](/en/circulars/)

[Consultations \(/en/consultations/\)](/en/consultations/)

[Directory \(/en/directory/\)](/en/directory/)

[Policies \(/en/policies/\)](/en/policies/)

[Publications \(/en/publications/\)](/en/publications/)

## About gov.ie

[About gov.ie \(/en/help/about-govie/\)](/en/help/about-govie/)

[Accessibility \(/en/help/accessibility/\)](/en/help/accessibility/)

[Privacy policy \(/en/help/privacy-policy/\)](/en/help/privacy-policy/)

[Who does what \(/en/help/e170a-who-does-what/\)](/en/help/e170a-who-does-what/)



**Rialtas na hÉireann**  
Government of Ireland

## Manage cookie preferences

Manage preferences