

Fianna Fail wants to “continue to strengthen” social partnership

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Fianna Fail’s election manifesto claims ownership of social partnership as a concept and says it wants conclude a new “national wage deal” when the current public service one expires.

The party says that it “created Social Partnership as a working principle in Ireland, and we acknowledge the importance of public sector workers who provide essential services across the country on a 24/7 basis”.

If returned to Government, the manifesto says Fianna Fáil will:

- Continue to strengthen the Social Partnership model.
- Seek to negotiate a new national wage deal following the completion of the Public Service Agreement in 2026.
- Ensure that the new national wage deal strengthens public services, drives public service reform and recognises the central contribution of workers in the delivery of better public services.
- Ensure employment law is upheld.

IDEOLOGICAL FAULTLINE?

There is no mention in the manifesto of any intention to seek a national-level pay deal other than for the public service; in the social partnership period (1987-2009) a private sector pay deal was part of those agreements.

In recent times, Fianna Fail and its main coalition partner, Fine Gael, have eschewed any return to national bargaining in the private sector. This has also been the case for ICTU private sector unions and the employer’s body, Ibec. Both entities played central roles in devising pay deals during the 22-year social partnership era.

Nonetheless, even the decision by Fianna Fail to use the description “social partnership” and to claim historic ownership of it, lays down something of an ideological marker of difference between it and Fine Gael.

The latter party has always had a more sceptical view of the process, although this didn’t stop it being part of, and even expanding, partnership’s remit while in government. When John Bruton was Taoiseach between 1994-97, he was instrumental in drawing in the ‘social pillar’ – a raft of socially concerned organisations – into the non-pay part of the negotiations.

THE EXCEPTION

John Bruton was, however, largely the exception as Fine Gael leader in this regard, because he took a more pragmatic approach as Taoiseach when set against the more sceptical attitude previously held by his party.

As an ex-Taoiseach, Garret Fitzgerald, was highly critical of the first agreement, the Programme for National Recovery. Later, the influential, Richard Bruton, like FitzGerald, also cautioned the danger that partnership potentially undermined the role of parliament.

This view was later challenged vigorously by Bertie Ahern, regarded perhaps as the champion of an idea whose roots go back to Fianna Fail's Sean Lemass in the early post-war period.

PRAGMATISM

When he was asked in 2022 whether he would consider the return of social partnership, Leo Varadkar, then Fine Gael Taoiseach, said that it was not something he was ideologically opposed to, and recalled that former FG Taoiseach, John Bruton, had negotiated one of the early national programmes.

Mr Varadkar even suggested social partnership couldn't be ruled out as a way of doing business ([*Government would consider tripartite "incomes policy" – Varadkar, IRN 14 - 07/04/2022*](#))

The current Fianna Fail leader, Micheál Martin, speaking as Taoiseach in the second half of 2020 as the country began to partially open up during the Covid-19 pandemic, said he was anxious "to develop and expand the engagement with the social partners more generally". He highlighted the role played by the Labour Employer Economic Form (LEEF), noting that ICTU and Ibec had worked well under its aegis to facilitate a safe return to work.

PRIMACY OF PARLIAMENT

Micheál Martin added that throughout his political life he held "a long-standing belief in the value and importance of engagement with stakeholders in our society, particularly social partners".

In response to a query from Sinn Féin leader, Mary Lou McDonald, he said this was "not about co-opting" anybody into a "corporate programme".

Regarding the primacy of parliament, Mr Martin cautioned that "throughout all of our engagements ... the Government will continue to ensure that the role of the Oireachtas is fully respected and recognised as part of the policy formation process".