

**STATEMENT BY AN TAOISEACH MR BERTIE AHERN T.D.
GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS WEDNESDAY 2ND APRIL 2008**

I have been privileged to serve my community, my party and our country for many years in public life. In that period, I am proud to have made a contribution to an unrivalled era of peace, prosperity and progress on this island.

Any achievements I have accomplished I share with the many people who have stood with me and behind me. I am grateful to so many people who have over the years given generously of their time and effort and shared my commitment to public service and building a fairer, stronger Ireland.

At the outset today, I want to thank my family who from the earliest stages supported me and always encouraged me throughout my journey in public life.

My motivation for entering politics in 1977 was to represent the people of my constituency; throughout my political life my greatest honour has been to represent them in Dail Eireann. I have been elected ten times in those 31 years by the people of Dublin Central I want to give special thanks to my constituency organisation. Their unprecedented commitment and friendship has never wavered. They have come with me, through good times and bad times, and for that I am very grateful.

Today, I thank all of those who have canvassed for me in election after election. I particularly recall those friends no longer with us but whose memories will always stay with me.

Today I also want to say that I am humbled to have been entrusted for over a decade with the great responsibility of leading our nation. The Irish people are innately decent and I have been privileged to serve them and to enjoy tremendous support. I especially wish to acknowledge all those people who took the time to pray for me, to send me mass-cards and letters of goodwill. As a political leader, I always took great encouragement and solace from such support.

In November 1994, I was elected leader of Fianna Fáil, the Republican Party. This was for me and my family an extraordinary honour. To follow in the footsteps of DeValera, Lemass and those other giants of this nation's history was both a daunting prospect and an historic opportunity. Almost fourteen years on, I am today Ireland's second longest serving Taoiseach and the second longest serving leader of Fianna Fail.

I believe the secret of Fianna Fail's enduring success is rooted in the quality of people that we have as public representatives. I have been privileged to work with patriotic and decent colleagues and I will always be grateful for the faith they placed in me.

I want to thank all of my Fianna Fail ministerial colleagues, our parliamentary party and all our councillors for their incredible support, overwhelming loyalty, and most of all their friendship which has sustained me throughout my period as Uachtaran Fhianna Fáil.

Beyond our elected representatives I also want to pay tribute to the members of the Fianna Fail National Executive and our party members in every cumann across the length and breadth of this country for whom I have a lasting respect. These ordinary patriotic men and women have been an inspiration to me. Their commitment and loyalty to our party is unmatched and I believe was a decisive factor in last year's General Election.

Election 2007 demonstrated Fianna Fail's continuing strength and vitality as a national movement. I want to thank the tens of thousands of members and activists up and down the country for delivering that historic success.

I am proud to be the first Taoiseach since 1944 to be elected on three successive occasions. On the day, I took over as leader of Fianna Fail, I pledged to lead our party back into government and keep us there.

I said then that I would strive to build up our economy. Today Ireland is more prosperous than at any time in our entire history. All levels of Irish society have seen their well-being dramatically improved in the period I have served as Taoiseach.

Above all else, I promised that day, that the priority I would put above all others would be to work for peace on this island. I kept my word and I have given my all to that cause.

Through painstaking negotiations, colossal work has been done in laying the foundations of reconciliation and justice between the communities in Northern Ireland. The cycle of hatred and violence which many people thought might never end has been well and truly broken.

The Good Friday Agreement now provides the political framework for an island that can at last achieve its full potential. This week and next week, many of those who a decade ago played a role in negotiating that historic accord will gather to reflect on the work which was done and the progress which has since been made.

In preparing for the events to mark this anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, I've obviously reflected back on the road we have travelled from discord to peace, from distrust to partnership and from despair to a new prosperity, north and south. I have also taken this opportunity to take stock of my own position.

At the end of this month, I will visit Washington to address the Joint Houses of Congress. It will be a great privilege to become only the fourth ever visiting statesman to have addressed both Congress and Westminster. For me, this will be one of the proudest moments of my political career.

In looking back on all the things I wanted to achieve in politics, I am proud that as Taoiseach I have:

- delivered on my objective to bring the peace process to fruition;
- delivered on my objective to see a stable administration based on the power-sharing model take root in Northern Ireland;
- delivered successive social partnership agreements which underpin our social and economic progress;
- delivered a modern economy with sustainable growth in employment and brought an end to the days of forced emigration;
- delivered on my objective to improve and to secure Ireland's position as a modern, dynamic and integral part of the European Union.

As leader of Fianna Fáil, I am proud too that I have ended the myth that Fianna Fail is incapable of sustaining a coalition government. I have led the two longest serving coalitions in the history of this State. I have also laid the foundations for another long running and successful coalition government which has the capacity to run a full term. I have the utmost respect for John Gormley, Mary Harney and their respective parties who continue to work hard to deliver a strong and stable government and implement our Agreed Programme for Government. I also wish to acknowledge the steadfast support from Independent Deputies who have supported me in government.

Just as stability is important in a coalition government, it is even more vital within a political organisation. I always said that there would be no room for factions in Fianna Fail under my leadership and I am proud today to lead a strong and united party.

A strong, united party working within a cohesive government underpins stability and means the primary focus of government is on performance, not on any other external distractions.

It is a matter of real concern to me that the important work of government and party is now being over shadowed by issues relating to me at the Tribunal of Inquiry into Certain Planning Matters and Payments.

The constant barrage of commentary on Tribunal related matters has and I believe will continue to dominate the political agenda at an important point for our country. We face uncertain economic times and challenges and we are soon to cast our vote on the Lisbon Treaty. The vital interests of Ireland demand that the national dialogue of our political system address these fundamental issues and not be constantly deflected by the minutiae of my life, my lifestyle, and my finances.

The decision I am announcing today - like all other decisions that I have taken in a lifetime in politics - is solely motivated by what is best for the people. I have been reflecting on pursuing this course of action for some time. This is solely a personal decision. I have no doubt that a simplistic analysis will suggest that my decision has been influenced by most recent events at the Tribunal. What I announce today is completely inspired by the desire to refocus the political dynamic in Ireland.

Recent developments have not motivated my decision. For the record I state today that nothing could be further from the truth. I look forward to comprehensively dealing with these matters at the Tribunal and robustly refuting any imputation against me.

I first sought election to the office of Taoiseach on the pledge that I would put people before politics. I have kept that promise. I have always placed the interests of the Irish people above my own. Therefore I will not allow issues relating to my own person to dominate the body politic as this would be contrary to the long term interests of the Irish people.

I want everyone to understand one truth above all else. Never, in all the time I have served in public life, have I put my personal interest ahead of the public good. I have served this country and the people I have the honour to represent in Dáil Éireann honestly.

I have provided more details about my personal finances than any person in public life who has ever held office. While I will be the first to admit that I have made mistakes in my life and in my career, one mistake I have never made is to enrich myself by misusing the trust of the people.

I have never received a corrupt payment and I have never done anything to dishonour any office I have held. I know that some people will feel that some aspects of my finances are unusual. I truly regret if this has caused any confusion or worry in people's minds. All of these issues arose in a period when my family, personal and professional situations were rapidly changing and I made the best decisions I could in the circumstances in which I found myself. I know in my heart of hearts that I have done no wrong and wronged no-one.

I look forward to the completion of the Tribunal's work and I am confident that when it reports, the Tribunal will find that I have not acted improperly in anyway. Equally I will not allow issues concerning myself or my finances to divert attention from the

important job of government at hand. I believe it is in the best interests of the Government, my Party and most importantly the people of Ireland that I set out the time-frame for my departure from office.

It had always been my intention to review my position as Taoiseach and leader of Fianna Fail in the aftermath of next summer's Local and European Elections. But having reflected on the need to ensure that the work of my ministerial colleagues is not distracted from by incessant publicity about the Tribunal, I have decided of my own volition to bring forward the date.

I will complete my duties over the course of the next month and following on from my return from the United States and the State Visit to Ireland by the Prime Minister of Japan; it is my intention to tender my resignation to President McAleese on Tuesday 6th May. On that date, I will also tender my resignation as Uachtaran Fhianna Fail.

In meantime, I will continue to discharge my duties as Taoiseach to the best of my ability, and to work as hard as I have always done, to secure the continued peace and prosperity of the island of Ireland.