

**James Lawless T.D. oration at the Captain Noel Lemass Commemoration
Thursday 5th July 2018**

A Chairde, a dhaoine uaisle, is mór an onóir é labhairty leat anocht.

Elected Representatives, Members of Ard Chomhairle and other dignitaries. Thank you for your warm welcome and invite to speak.

I want to thank the organisers of today's event, including our party Vice President Arthur Griffin, members of our party, and of course members of the Lemass family gathered here tonight including Aidan O'Connor and our own friend and colleague Deputy Seán Haughey.

I have a particular fondness for this part of the world. Close to the cross section of the Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow borders it is a familiar scene to my own constituency in Kildare North. The areas of Killeel and Blessington roll into Dublin seamlessly. Indeed only a few miles from here in Tipperkevin on the Wicklow / Kildare border the pilgrim trail of St. Kevin's Way begins which later culminates in the well-known site at Glendalough. The classic work of folklore and local history "*Malachai Horan Remembers*" catalogued a local man's love for these hills in the early 20th century and highlighted the rich history with megalithic tombs at Killinarden, cairns and passage graves, patches of hungry grass cursed from the age of the famine as well as the likes of the Hellfire club in these parts. Legend even has it that Finn McCool legendary leader of Na Fianna lies buried here.

These are a part of our national identity and I want to acknowledge the work of local Deputy John Lahart who recently persuaded the state to purchase a very significant landholding of 5,000 mountain acres which was being auctioned off by NAMA. That intervention ensured it remains in public ownership for generations to come.

I always enjoy canvassing in these surroundings. At commemorations like these it is important to remember our roots. I want to take a brief moment to talk about the late Jim Grainger. Jim was a supporter of mine and lived close by in Kiltel. We would often canvass together and I remember in the dark days of 2011 we were being ran from the doors. I was very grateful to Jim for persevering but wondered at his age why he was happy to take such punishment. He instantly replied that of course he would, his father was one of the “16/22” men and he would knock on doors until he no longer could. That is a tradition we hold dear in the party and it is a torch which we are honoured to carry on.

It is truly a privilege to be asked to speak here tonight. Captain Noel Lemass paid the ultimate sacrifice for his country. The actions he undertook in the GPO, the Four Courts, and the life of public service that the Lemass family gave to the State reflect the strong character and drive that Noel carried. Speaking to family members this week I understand some say that Noel would have gone on to be the more successful of the two brothers in politics. The press coverage of his funeral reveals a lot about him that the *Irish Times* described it as “ranking with some of the largest seen in the city in recent years”.

We know the facts around his atrocious abduction and murder and the subsequent inquest. A memo noted at the time from his alleged killers and from those who advocated a cover up revealed their line of thinking. The memo said simply that “Lemass is gone and the earlier he is forgotten the better”. The best answer we can give the authors of that memo, almost a century later, is our presence here this evening.

His body, discovered at this site, in the most brutal of circumstances gave him a status among republicans as a martyr. While we have a grand tradition of heroic failure and martyrdom in the Republican tradition, and of course we rightly hold such men and women in great acclaim, we also understand that we can best honour them through success. Our republican heroes did not give their lives for the status quo to remain but rather for the party and the nation to adapt and

evolve as Ireland did and to go on to lead social and economic change in each generation. It is the most fitting tribute to Noel that his brother went on to lead Ireland's economic recovery and serve as one of our greatest Leaders.

The party continues to rebuild from the 2011 low tide mark but we must acknowledge we still have much work to do to restore our numbers and to restore our connection with the Irish people. We have been at this point in time before. This is not the first, or the last time, Fianna Fáil has faced a period of social change. In 1954 a young Sean Lemass began an organisational campaign which would change Fianna Fáil, our local organisations, the Parliamentary Party, and ultimately the State, for the better. Lemass knew that the party had to move on from the stances held from the rising and the civil war. Lemass led a renewal tour to each constituency meeting with the local organisation surveying the Fianna Fáil machine. I understand he could drive for hundreds of miles without exchanging a word of conversation, perhaps concentrating on the mission at the end of each journey. Being a visionary he also had the good sense to stop off in Kildare to take in an early race meetings in the Curragh before travelling on to that nights Cumann meeting.

Lemass knew those who gave their lives for Ireland did so to see the country and the political party grow and prosper. Every time I leave my office in Leinster House I am reminded of their actions and sacrifices as a painting of a red sun soaked Four Courts hangs on my office wall.

The party must continue to adapt and change with the times. We can never be complacent about our place in Irish history or even in current politics. Around the world, other parties with long, proud traditions in their countries history have diminished and become displaced in the modern landscape. Lessons must be learned from these political movements. It is essential that we continually adapt and stay in tune with the mood of the people.

Over 310 years in existence the Whigs and then Liberal Party in England failed to acknowledge the mood of the electorate and suffered their fate as a chapter in history books. Despite a rich history which shaped English politics, overseen by political stalwarts such as William Gladstone, David Lloyd George, and Winston Churchill they overseen the emergence of the British Empire. Notwithstanding having a strong hold on British culture the party dwindled in popularity and relevance as it failed to change with the mood of the people. By the early twentieth century "Whiggery" was largely irrelevant and without a natural political home. They had been left behind in a changing world. It happens and we cannot be complacent.

Fianna Fáil has faced times of change and adapted before. It is important to be in tune with the mood of the people and our party finds itself at this juncture once again. In 1927 Fianna Fáil was behind Cumann na nGaedheal. With only 44 TD's we had ground to make up. Over the next five years the party, led by Eamon de Valera went to the people with proposals for improvements in housing, social security, and industrial development. In the election of 1932 Fianna Fáil went into power with 72 seats and effectively led the country until 2011 overseeing enormous economic and social growth.

The only constant in life is change and the general public are often the ones who set the pace and direction. We need to listen to the people and understand what the electorate want. I recall Michael Yeats, who worked in Fianna Fáil head office, in the 1950's, detailing the attention Lemass gave to the opinion of the people. Mr Yeats told us of his understanding of local issues affecting the everyday lives of people on the ground by revealing "He also wanted to know about any local political problems there might be all over the country. I read some 45 local newspapers and cut out for him to read any items that might possibly be of interest".

Sean Lemass' modernisation of the party included younger members who would go on to play a significant role in the future and shape Fianna Fáil policy for the coming thirty years. His organising committee included the likes of a young Charles Haughey, Brian Lenihan (Senior) and Paddy Hillery. It is important to listen to younger voices that are so often in tune with the public and the direction of the world. I attended a speech in Trinity College with my young daughter Niamh recently in which Hillary Clinton and former President Mary Robinson described that 30% of the world's population is under 30 years of age. The under thirty generation have shaped policy in Ireland significantly in recent years like never before. It is important that we in Fianna Fáil acknowledge their views and understand this is a reflection of the way the world is moving.

This new generation of the electorate must be listened to in the same way Lemass' young organising committee was listened to when they spread the gospel of Keynesianism and economic planning; the Lemass formula for taking the country out of the economic and social trough in which it stagnated. One of our party greats, who sometimes faced criticism in older years as one reluctant to change, former Leader, Taoiseach and President Eamonn De Valera, could see the potential within Lemass to carry Fianna Fáil and the State forward. Recalling the relationship between Lemass and De Valera, T.K. Whitaker, said "One must see that Dev recognised, through the eminence he gave to Lemass, the deficiency in his own viewpoint". This self-awareness showcased from an elder statesman of modern Ireland is admirable.

Lemass knew that the party had to articulate a more sophisticated view of the country's social and economic problems. In many cases this can be applied to Fianna Fáil in 2018 and the leadership Michael Martin T.D. has shown on many hard issues. His courage, stance and decisiveness on these issues must be greatly commended.

In modernising Fianna Fáil during the 1950's the *Irish Times* described the actions of Lemass and the organising committee by stating "these are men whose outlook is settled on 1953, rather than 1923, and for that reason alone the Government will do well to accept them as people with a real contribution to make".

Our party leader, Michael Martin T.D., in a speech at the Ragg, Tipperary in April 2011 set our stall for renewal including a slew of new ideas and organisational reforms to take us forward. It is a great credit to the leader, to the national executive and the ordinary members of the party that many of these reforms are now a reality. However renewal must never be seen as a once off exercise but rather a constant mantra to challenge ourselves to do better, to adapt and always ask the question is there a better way forward?

Time spent in opposition is often an opportunity to make progress on policy, on organisational and on political fronts. It allows a certain freedom from accountability that parties in Government are seldom afforded. In Cleary's ballroom on O'Connell Street on October 11th 1954 Lemass eloquently described this period of opposition as "Our present period of release from immediate responsibility for Government". Lemass was a visionary and his outlook and appetite for modernisation is one we must all carry.

Charles Darwin, a biologist who spent his career studying the science of evolution said "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change".

We must always challenge ourselves to do better. In trying and challenging times there is great potential. Obama's sage, Rahm Emanuel, always said there was opportunity in crisis. We are past the crisis stage as a party but we are still in a period of opportunity to rebuild, renew and reshape our ship for the next voyage.

We can do this through our parliamentary party, our local organisations, and our members in every town and village in this country. Ultimately our goal must be to return to Government and lead the country once again.

This process has begun. In Fianna Fáil we undertook a period of rebuilding following 2011. Significant progress was made. In 2016 we welcomed 24 new Dáil deputies making a total of now 45 and also held our numbers in Seanad Éireann. At local level in 2014 we established ourselves as the largest party in local government and over that term we have held the Mayoralty or been in leadership positions in almost all local authorities. I see today a new generation of young, energetic local election candidates preparing themselves for next May 2019 and represent the party in this new era.

We cannot rest. We cannot take these advances for granted. We must be mindful that changing and adapting to the world around us is not reactionary but should be continuous. In 1959 when Lemass became Taoiseach he was in tune with the mood of the people. He thought not of electoral cycles but of generations and the results of his leadership are tangible to this day. In 2018 we must look toward the coming decades and picture an Ireland in 2059. One hundred years on from Lemass' first day as Taoiseach there can still be a Fianna Fáil Taoiseach in Government buildings on that day. We must prepare now as a modern party to lead a modern Ireland into this modern era.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh agus ar aghaidh le Fianna Fáil.

James Lawless TD