Social Democrats Manifesto – Election Diary

In the latest instalment of our election diary, we examine the Social Democrats’ manifesto for policies pertaining to environmental protection and climate change.

Agriculture and Forestry

Agriculture and Forestry are covered in their own section, where many environmentally relevant policies are proposed. Explicitly linking the vulnerability of the agricultural sector to climate change and extreme weather events, they propose to grow resilience amongst small and medium farmers by supporting them to diversify into biomass, forestry and renewable electricity generation. The agriculture policy section states that these measures will help with “tackling harmful emissions”, but does not elaborate as to whether this increase in supplementary activities will lead to a decrease in the net emissions of the sector as a whole. As for forestry, they plan to develop “ambitious targets to 2030 for woodland coverage”. The mention of “woodland Conservation and Sequestration” is promising, but without consideration of the kind of soil that is forested and attention to the way in which the forestry is managed, large-scale afforestation can have detrimental environmental effects.

Transport

On transport, the party supports a shift away from emission-intensive car transport towards cleaner and more efficient forms of public transport. They propose a number of measures towards this goal, among the most environmentally significant are:

1. Ensure that capital spending on roads is at least matched by capital spending on public transport.
2. Reducing public transport fares to increase use.
3. Increase incentives and subsidies to purchase electric vehicles.
4. Enhance cycling infrastructure in major cities and towns.

Clean Energy System

With regards to low-carbon sources of energy, to which the Social Democrats devote two pages of their manifesto, a range of policies aim to increase the renewable share of our energy as well as community participation in energy production. However, the omission of a clear position on the controversial practice of hydraulic fracturing (or ‘fracking’) begs the question as to whether they would be in favour of extracting gas by this means. They recognise that the majority of the work to phase out fossil fuels needs to be in “the first half of this century”, which is in line with the urgency of the crisis that we face. They plan to achieve this by:

1. Becoming EU leaders in the development and generation of ocean energy.
2. Establishing an Offshore Wind Development Agency and simplifying the regulations in this area to attract investment.
3. Placing community and citizen concerns at the heart of the planning process of onshore windfarms, as well as increasing community ownership of these schemes.
4. Phasing out state subsidies for carbon-intense forms of electricity generation.
5. Converting peat-burning electricity plants to plants that burn domestically-produced biomass as far as possible.
6. Encouraging electricity suppliers to expand home microgeneration pilot schemes and enhance the supports available for home efficiency retrofitting.
7. Auditing the energy performance of public buildings and retrofitting where viable.
8. Working with local authorities to greatly enhance Community Energy Schemes.

Climate Change

The party sees the transition to a low-carbon economy as an opportunity that holds many benefits to Irish society, and contends that “our future environmental, social and economic health” depends on making this transition. Their priorities for tackling Climate change are:

1. Introduce specific domestic targets on emissions reduction and fossil fuel use.
2. Introduce comprehensive and attainable mitigation action plans with regular reviews and mandatory corrective measures.
3. Enhance the powers of the Climate Change Advisory Council.
4. Ensure that emissions reduction targets are applied appropriately to all non-Emissions Trading Scheme sectors in the state.
5. Fund technical assistance to aid organisations develop carbon mitigation programmes
6. Encourage greater take-up of proven methods of carbon sequestration – chiefly forestry and wetlands.

Water

In a section on water charges, they propose protecting public ownership of water in the constitution via a referendum, to ensure that it cannot become privatised. While this may preserve the right to access water, failure to implement measures that conserve water effectively may mean that there will not always be sufficient water available to meet the nation’s needs.