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Address to Wind Energy Ireland Annual Conference
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Friends, this is a time of change in Ireland and throughout the world. There are real challenges, but where there are challenges, there are opportunities and I fully believe that this can be Ireland's decade of opportunity.

To achieve the reunification of our country.

To achieve energy independence and win a just transition and energy transformation for all.

To build a better, stronger, fairer Ireland,

Working together, we can embrace change, invest in change, and ensure that this transformation is planned, strategic and backed with energy and resources by the state.

The currents of change in Ireland pulse against the backdrop of an existential climate crisis. The clock is ticking.

There can be no doubt that tomorrow will be shaped by the choices we make today. These choices fall to our generation, all of us, together.

Ireland and the world stand at a crossroads.

One road, the road trodden for decades by dependence on fossil fuels and dirty industry, leads us to climate, environmental and ecological catastrophe. It's a dead end.

The second road leads to seismic transformation that will ensure a cleaner, greener, prosperous, secure future for us, our children, and our grandchildren. A future realised through an energy revolution spearheaded by renewable energy.

An energy future, led by renewables, is not only vital for the environment, but it also has the potential to create the new economic model that Ireland will need to take advantage of global challenge and change.

An economic model of clean industry and well-paid clean jobs that is agile, resilient, and driven by innovation, collaboration, and a real partnership.

Weaning our country off our dependence on fossil fuel imports is key to protecting workers, families, and our economy, from the type of international energy shocks that has led to soaring electricity bills in the last two years.

Embracing the opportunities presented to us by renewables - wind energy, solar power, battery technology, green hydrogen - is how we achieve energy independence for Ireland over the next decade.

Working together, we can create a new prosperity for Ireland by investing in change. Our vast natural, renewable resources can be translated into national wealth for all.

The Irish wind energy industry has demonstrated time and again that it is at the forefront of Ireland's energy revolution, of driving ambitious, positive change.

It is our best asset for lowering electricity prices for consumers, creating new green jobs, and tackling regional disparity.

In a beautiful song, the musician Donovan employs the line, 'Ah, but I may as well try and catch the wind' to express the futility of his heart's desires. For him, trying to catch the wind is the utmost measure of the impossible, the stuff of dreams.

The idea of harnessing the power of the wind has always fascinated and inspired as a goal of great human endeavour, as a marker of human progress and a determination to push the boundaries.

However, the aim of catching and harnessing the power of the wind is not a feat hemmed in by the contours of dreams.

What musicians and poets use as a metaphor for the impossible has been made entirely possible, mostly by the people and the organisations represented in this room today – Ireland's wind-catchers, Ireland's wind-harnessers, Ireland's energy revolutionaries.

Impossible, as they say, is nothing.

Our country enjoys an abundant wind energy resource. The potential to utilise wind, and other renewables, to decarbonise our economy and make Ireland an international hub of clean energy is crystal clear.

The story of Ireland's wind energy development is a story of opportunity, ambition, and achievement in the face of big challenges.

I want to acknowledge the progress made over the past year, particularly the holding of the first offshore auction and the establishment of the Marine Area Regulatory Authority.

These are important steps forward that formed the backdrop to what was a milestone year for wind energy in Ireland.

Last year, wind farms generated 35 percent of Ireland's electricity – a total 13,725 gigawatt hours – a new record. This saved the state more than 900 million euro on gas, most of which would have been imported. In the North, the saving was nearly 250 million pounds.

This is down to your hard work, enterprise, and endeavour.

But in acknowledging this achievement, we must also acknowledge that it was accomplished in a context rife with persistent and frustrating barriers.

Barriers that prevent the level of electricity that should and could be generated by wind in Ireland.

This reality makes the generation of 35 percent even more impressive.

Despite this success we won't hit the target of connecting 9,000 MW of onshore to the grid by 2030 at the current rate of progress. We're still not realising the huge potential of wind energy.

So, what's the problem?

Industry is up and at it, playing its part. The expertise and enthusiasm in this room is tangible. You are answering the call to scale up Ireland's wind energy production and to meet Ireland's 2030 climate action targets, and beyond.

Last year, saw a record level of wind energy capacity enter the planning process. The momentum from industry is undeniable and it should be irresistible.

A big part of the problem is that the state is not pulling its weight in Ireland's energy revolution. However, the state and the government has yet to get its act together, yet to bring the pace, urgency, and ambition, yet to deliver the plan and actions required to realise the full potential of wind energy in Ireland.

The drive to take Ireland's wind energy production to the next level must come from the very centre of government and that drive is absent.

The vital all-of-government – shoulders behind the wheel – approach is missing. Government has failed to grasp that our renewable energy transformation and the push towards energy independence in our time must be a national mission.

Government must be inspired, motivated, and fully mobilised behind the vision of an Ireland that can power itself - in a way that is clean, sustainable, secure, and translates into affordable energy for workers, families, and businesses.

The impetus from government to get wind projects up and running to the scale required simply isn't there.

As a result, barriers and bottlenecks persist.

The planning system remains slow, under-resourced, adversarial, and racked with uncertainty. The Electricity Grid is not a grid built for the 21st century and lacks sufficient capacity.

And we need government to prioritise the building of a workforce with the necessary skills and experience to deliver energy independence and security, and to achieve our targets.

The inefficient nature of the planning system has real consequences.

RESS 3 delivered the lowest volume at the highest prices.

There are some reasons for this that are beyond the government's control, but a lot of the increase is due to policy decisions, in relation to planning and grid and auction design, amongst other things.

We have called for a cross-Government, high level task force to be established, to work with industry and other stakeholders, to identify the contributory factors and to bring forward recommendations urgently on how we can cut the cost of producing renewable energy here.

Far too few onshore projects made it through the planning system in 2023.

The majority were stuck in planning for over a year – well above the statutory minimum of 18 weeks.

Some were even stuck in planning for close to three years. This is nowhere near the pace required to deliver Ireland's energy transition, let alone an energy revolution.

Alarming, some projects are waiting so long for planning or a grid connection that they are timing out of their RESS contracts.

Is it any wonder that between 2020 and 2022, 156 Megawatt-hours were connected when we need to be connecting 410 Megawatt-hours every year this decade?

This is frustrating and it is holding us back.

We must remove these obstacles restricting onshore wind production and we cannot let them hamstring the massive opportunity of offshore.

There has been real progress in offshore. Delivering all Phase 1 projects safely through the system must be a key objective for the state.

Offshore wind has incredible potential, and we must pursue it enthusiastically, but we must also drive onshore wind production to scale. It can't be one or the other. It must be both, together, with pace and determination.

We can't afford the state continuing to play the role of passenger.

The state must lead, that's its job, as Roy Keane would say.

So, Government must now step-up and play its part, fully.

The first demonstration of this leadership must be to deal with the entrenched barriers faced by wind energy projects.

In the first instance, this means delivering a planning system that is fit for purpose.

It's a no-brainer.

Government must treat, as a priority, the resourcing of An Board Pleanála to ensure it is fit to progress wind energy projects through the system in an efficient manner.

We have to ramp- up staffing levels in the system.

We have to get the right people with the right expertise, and we have to get enough of them.

New planning laws and agencies must also deliver, and Sinn Féin's Eoin O'Broin and Darren O'Rourke have been working alongside the renewable industry to ensure the new Planning and Development Bill works for communities, for the renewable sector and for the task of meeting our climate targets.

There must be statutory timelines for legal challenges and judicial reviews to be processed and completed.

It's a cornerstone of democracy that individuals and communities have the right to take such challenges, but it's clear that efficiency must be improved so that renewables projects aren't smothered by a process that is excruciatingly slow and uncertain.

This is why Sinn Féin has long advocated for an environmental and planning court to speed-up this process.

This same enthusiasm and fresh thinking are what will drive the modernisation of our electricity grid for the 21st century. Securing a grid connection is a real barrier to progressing renewable projects.

Decades of bad planning and inaction has created this problem. A major step change is needed.

Eirgrid's 1.1 shaping our electricity future is a good start, but we must ensure that it is supported and resourced.

We also need a conclusion to the long-awaited private wires consultation. Consultations and reports have their place.

However, Ireland cannot afford a continuation of the stop-start-delay approach to Grid development.

What we need to see is the real work to upgrade the Grid being done so that we increase the number of connections for renewable energy into the system and ensure the hard work you do is harnessed for the good of the nation.

Ultimately, it is the talent, skills, education, and expertise of our people that will power our renewable energy transformation to next level.

'Building Our Potential: Ireland's Offshore Wind Skills and Talent Needs,' the report published today captures crisply the challenges and the opportunities before us.

The industry is key in tackling skills shortages. We know a business-as-usual approach simply won't cut it.

Government must truly partner with industry and focus on training, upskilling, and reskilling people to develop a workforce that can deliver the renewable energy revolution, reach our targets, and achieve energy independence for Ireland. This will require government working closely with the renewable sector, second and third level education, technical unions, and local government to realise this vision.

These are the areas Sinn Féin in government would prioritise to advance Ireland's energy revolution. We would bring the pace, urgency, vision, and the can-do attitude that the state is currently lacking.

A Sinn Féin government would sort the delays in our planning system, invest in our public infrastructure, and work in collaboration with business, semi-states, and international partners, to realise investment opportunities.

We want to work in partnership with you to generate, to create, to innovate, to succeed.

We understand the gravity and the urgency, but we also understand the opportunity that must be seized.

We need a real plan.

We need real pace.

We need real delivery.

The moment is now. We are the generation to get this done. To get this right. There is not a minute more to be wasted. There is too much at stake. Too much to achieve. I believe that we can do it, that we must do it, that we will do it. We will realise the renewable energy revolution and energy independence for Ireland together.

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