

**Social  
Democrats**

# Honest Politics, Better Government

---

Restoring Trust in Politics and Public Life

For the Future  
It Starts Here

[#VoteSocDems](#)



# Contents

Key Points .....	1
Introduction.....	3
Tackling Waste.....	4
More Accountability in Government.....	6
More Transparency in Decision-Making.....	7
An Independent Anti-Corruption Agency .....	9
Reforming Lobbying.....	11



## Key Points

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Publish a National Anti-Corruption Strategy.
- Reform the Ministers and Secretaries Act, to make senior civil servants accountable for their actions.
- Establish a new Government Accountability Office, which would:
  - Perform the role of a public spending watchdog in real-time.
  - Engage with senior civil servants and accounting officers in government departments on an ongoing basis to ensure appropriate implementation of, and compliance with, all relevant aspects of the public spending code throughout the life cycle of large infrastructure projects.
  - Ensure information gleaned and lessons learned during the project life cycle are incorporated into a holistic ex post audit, by reporting findings to the Comptroller & Auditor General.
  - Employ public financial management specialists equipped for rigorous spending oversight.
- Improve the Oireachtas Committee vetting procedure for senior appointments to public bodies.
- Legislate so that public procurement data can be systematically screened for bid-rigging to improve value-for-money on capital investment.
- Replace the Official Secrets Act 1963 with legislation that strikes a better balance between maintaining state security and protecting whistle-blowers in reporting wrongdoing.
- Improve and urgently enact the long-delayed Public Sector Standards Bill 2015 which would go some way towards implementing the recommendations of the Mahon Tribunal and address future conflicts of interest by TDs, Ministers and officeholders.
- Review and update the Code of Conduct for lobbyists, with an aim of encouraging higher professional standards.
- Give SIPO (and any successor organisation) authority to make public its investigation reports into contraventions of the Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015.
- Establish a new Independent Anti-Corruption Agency (IACA) which would:

- Tackle white collar crime and corruption in the corporate world and political sphere.
- Operate as a standing Commission of Investigation, ending the need for expensive *ad hoc* tribunals.
- Assume the anti-corruption remit of the Standards in Public Office Commission, Corporate Enforcement Authority, Registrar of Lobbyists, and the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission.

## Introduction

People need a government they can trust, and taxpayers need to know their contribution is being invested well in quality public services, not squandered on vanity projects or wasted by overpaying for vital infrastructure.

Inadequate governance and accountability systems are at the heart of cost overruns involving massive amounts of public resources that could be spent elsewhere.

Too often, decisions on the allocation of significant state resources are influenced by the interests of well-connected individuals and organisations without proper recourse to evidence-based analysis, equality proofing, poverty proofing, or regulatory impact.

Repeatedly, we see that questions are asked after the fact and answers are hard to find, particularly when paper trails run out and memories falter.

In addition, Ireland does not have an effective means of preventing, detecting and prosecuting corruption and white-collar crime. Various tribunals and commissions of inquiry have come and gone with little consequence for corrupt, illegal, or immoral behaviour.

Accountability should not be an aspiration; it should be the minimum we can expect as citizens.

Individuals and organisations must pay the price for malpractice, corruption, gross incompetence, and reckless behaviour.

The Social Democrats have a plan to open up government and improve accountability whilst also tackling corruption in politics and public life. We believe this can restore confidence and trust in our politics and our democracy while encouraging civic participation.

## Tackling Waste

The current government is squandering the windfall from corporation tax receipts and, with it, a golden opportunity to invest in the public services and infrastructure we need for the future.

They seem to think that announcing flagship projects and writing blank cheques to cover endless cost over-runs is an appropriate way to conduct public spending.

Too much money is being wasted, and nobody is ever held accountable.

This has to stop; we need systemic change.

In Government, the Social Democrats will reform and build on Ireland's existing accountability framework. The Comptroller and Auditor General is established by the Constitution to audit public spending after it has occurred. The Oireachtas's Public Accounts Committee reviews reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General and attempts to hold public servants to account.

Too often, this is after the fact.

One missing piece of the system is a body to oversee spending and ensure accountability in real time. In Government, the Social Democrats would establish a new Government Accountability Office within the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

It's location within the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General would assure the Government Accountability Office's political independence, while respecting the important independent constitutional role of the Comptroller and Auditor General itself.

The Government Accountability Office would:

- Perform the role of a public spending watchdog in real-time.
- Engage with senior civil servants and accounting officers in government departments on an ongoing basis to ensure appropriate implementation of, and compliance with, all relevant aspects of the public spending code throughout the life cycle of large infrastructure projects.
- Ensure information gleaned and lessons learned during the project life cycle are incorporated into an holistic ex post audit by reporting findings to the Comptroller & Auditor General.



- Employ public financial management specialists equipped for rigorous spending oversight.
- Report to the Public Accounts Committee, as part of the Comptroller and Auditor General.
- Propose updates to the governance and accountability framework for public financial management, including:
  - Changes to the public spending code and their implementation to avoid the pitfalls in the system, highlighted by recent high-profile examples of over-spending on infrastructure projects, small and large.
  - Strengthening the public procurement guidelines for goods and services to ensure quality, efficiency, and the provider's track record are considered along with price.
- Advise the Dáil and high-level civil servants on ways to make public spending more efficient and effective.
- Work to eliminate wasteful or duplicative spending, consolidate programmes, and modernise how government departments work to save money and improve performance.

Such a Government Accountability Office, adequately funded and staffed, would make the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General more proactive than reactive, engaging in more than post-hoc auditing but also in real-time monitoring of major public spending initiatives.

## More Accountability in Government

The Social Democrats believe there needs to be a reform of the Ministers and Secretaries Act to make senior civil servants accountable for their actions.

The Act currently protects the relationship between Ministers and Secretaries General, making it virtually impossible to pinpoint how problems (e.g. substantial overspending) have occurred. It should certainly be possible to dismiss a senior public servant for misconduct or incompetence, but it is well known that this is rarely if ever done.

Too often, Ministerial interactions with lobbyists take place in informal settings or in meetings without civil servants present. Hidden and informal influence by a cosy circle of ‘insiders’ damages public trust in how important decisions are made at the highest levels. Ministers and senior civil servants should proactively publish online details of all meetings and interactions with lobbyists – including calendars and meeting agendas.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Reform the Ministers and Secretaries Act, to make senior civil servants accountable for their actions.
- Ensure that ministers and senior civil servants proactively publish online details of all meetings and interactions with lobbyists.

There must also be an end to ‘No Minutes’ policies for key meetings and decisions. The reasons for important decisions made by Ministers and senior officials are often not properly documented in official files.

- Oblige public officials to keep accurate records of key government decisions and actions – and to keep these for as long as they are needed for accountability purposes.

## More Transparency in Decision-Making

Public monies and resources have too often been used as political slush funds where the needs of insiders or the electoral interests of governing parties are favoured over genuine public need.

There have been revelations over many years of unfettered access for bidders on large state contracts to the corridors of power. Ireland also lags behind most OECD countries on safeguards against conflict-of-interest situations.

Time and again, when state contracts were being awarded, the right questions have not been asked. And time and again, the public has paid the price for shoddy governance and poor administration which has led to cost over-runs and delays, including notably on the National Children's Hospital.

The Social Democrats aim to bring about an end to "Golden Circle" politics by introducing meaningful changes to the culture, practices, and oversight of publicly-funded bodies.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Improve the Oireachtas Committee vetting procedure for all senior appointments to public bodies.

'Vetting' cannot happen after the fact, as a rubber stamp. We need to introduce objectivity and oversight into the process and ensure that appointments are made on the basis of merit, suitability and qualifications, rather than political connection.

By limiting ministerial discretion in this way, consistency and openness could be achieved and efforts made to bring about inclusivity and diversity in respect of the profiles of appointees.

- Revise the Infrastructure Guidelines that govern public spending on capital projects to strengthen governance and oversight arrangements in light of recent high-profile examples of significant cost over-runs and inexplicably high project costs.
- Equality-proof all legislative, policy and budgetary decisions.
- Poverty-proof all legislative, policy and budgetary decisions and introduce more evidence-based systems of resource allocation, based on objective, pre-constructed and evidence-based criteria. This would be conducted in line with a new Anti-Poverty Strategy, and would involve working within clearly

defined targets, timeframes and lines of responsibility that prioritise the welfare of the people of Ireland in all government decisions.

- Replace the Official Secrets Act 1963 with legislation that strikes a better balance between maintaining state security and protecting whistle-blowers in reporting wrongdoing.

The Act was written in very broad terms and has been misused as a means of blocking public interest-led disclosures. Such broad reaching restrictions are no longer appropriate.

- Actively and enthusiastically participate in the Open Government Partnership initiative by prioritising reforms which have the strong backing of civil society and which have the potential to be truly transformative.
- Introduce an e-Governance platform and publish more extensive data in open source to bring about a more open and transparent form of governance and a general presumption of openness in relation to state-held data.
- Improve and urgently enact the long-delayed Public Sector Standards Bill 2015 which would go some way towards implementing the recommendations of the Mahon Tribunal and address future conflicts of interest by TDs, Ministers and officeholders. The Bill has not progressed beyond committee stage in almost a decade.
- Empower the Standards in Public Office Commission (and any successor organisation) to verify conflict-of interest declarations using a risk-based approach, and to make public its recommendations and sanctions for past instances of conflict-of-interest.
- Create a 'legislative footprint' for all Acts of the Oireachtas to ensure full transparency in how our laws are influenced.

A comprehensive digital footprint would allow the public to see in one place the input of different groups and individuals in shaping legislation at different stages in its legislative journey. It would summarise all external input, including submissions received by public officials and representatives.

## An Independent Anti-Corruption Agency

Ireland does not have an effective means of preventing, detecting, and prosecuting corruption and white-collar crime. In fact, Ireland is one of the few OECD countries that doesn't yet have an anti-corruption strategy.

Various tribunals, commissions and Oireachtas inquiries have come and gone with little consequences for corrupt and reckless behaviour.

More than fifteen years on from the banking collapse, serious questions remain about the capacity of our criminal justice system when it comes to detecting and successfully prosecuting white collar crime.

Our chequered history with tribunals, ad hoc commissions of inquiry, and investigations into devastating banking practices instils little public confidence that we have an anti-corruption regime in Ireland that is robust, effective, and free from the clutches of those in power.

There is strong public perception of a golden-circle in Irish society, the members of which are accountable to no-one and regard themselves as untouchable.

Accountability is a core pillar of the Social Democrats vision. Accountability matters because without accountability there can be no trust in public institutions or fair dealings in business or public life. Lack of accountability damages the reputation of the country, undermines the authority of sound public institutions, and tarnishes our image as a place to do business.

Anti-corruption law is spread across a range of legislation, and responsibility for preventing and prosecuting corruption is spread across a multitude of agencies. Piecemeal reforms in recent years have fallen short of what is needed to protect government decision-making from being unduly influenced by vested interests.

More laws are not enough without the drive and resources to vigorously and proactively police them.

The Social Democrats first proposed the setting up of an independent anti-corruption agency in a motion brought to the Dáil in December 2015.

Our detailed proposals are based on best-practice internationally and cover corruption in both the public and the private sphere. Without a dedicated and properly resourced agency, we will continue to see a range of laws on our statute books which meet international standards, but which lead to few actual consequences for corrupt behaviour.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Publish a National Anti-Corruption Strategy.
- Legislate so that public procurement data can be systematically screened for bid-rigging to improve value-for-money on capital investment so that data already recorded in systems like eTenders can be shared with the appropriate public body.
- Revise the Infrastructure Guidelines that govern public spending on capital projects to strengthen governance and oversight arrangements in light of recent high-profile examples of significant cost over-runs and inexplicably high project costs.
- Establish a new Independent Anti-Corruption Agency (IACA). The IACA would:
  - Tackle white collar crime and corruption in the corporate world and political sphere.
  - Oversee implementation of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy.
  - Operate as a standing Commission of Investigation, ending the need for expensive ad hoc tribunals.
  - Assume the anti-corruption remit of the Standards in Public Office Commission, Corporate Enforcement Authority, Registrar of Lobbyists, and the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission.
  - Act as an advisory body to several other public bodies.
  - Monitor and investigate public procurement activities.
  - Conduct sectoral reviews and initiate investigations as and when necessary.
  - Work with a newly established Dáil oversight committee (the Public Interest Committee) that would oversee IACA and Ministerial resource allocation decisions.
  - Propose updates to anti-corruption legislation, including:
    - Setting minimum standards for eligibility to hold public office.
    - Requiring serving politicians to declare significant liabilities as well as assets.
    - Further reforming the law on lobbying.
    - Strengthening gift and hospitality rules for public servants.
    - Extending the Ethics in Public Office Act 1995 to cover members of the judiciary.

## Reforming Lobbying

There is a need for clear demarcation between the political arena and lobbying. Seamless movement between the public and private sectors fuels distrust in the political system. In recent years in particular, there have been several high-profile examples of ministerial advisors moving into the private sector and then often back into the public sector again, not to mention examples of ministers of state moving into jobs in sectors of the economy for which they previously had responsibility.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Ensure that where someone takes up a role as a lobbyist after leaving Leinster House, they will only be allowed access to Leinster House on the same basis as any other member of the public or civil society.
- Review and update the Code of Conduct for lobbyists, with an aim of encouraging higher professional standards.
- Give the Standards in Public Office Commission (SIPO), and any successor organisation, authority to make public its investigation reports into contraventions of the Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015.
- Resource SIPO (and any successor organisation) to conduct thorough spot checks of a proportion of all lobbying returns filed, and to ‘name and shame’ lobbyists who contravene the law by publishing its investigation reports.
- Give SIPO (and any successor organisation) power to receive complaints, inspect records and returns on the online register of lobbying activities, and verify information.
- Investigate the possibility of enshrining and enforcing certain principles in legislation, including honesty, transparency (which can be enshrined by creating criteria to ensure investigations are carried out in public to the greatest extent possible and that findings are published at an early date), accountability (laying out clear consequences for those engaged in wrongdoing) and timeliness (by setting out criteria for an early response to transgressions, ensuring this becomes the norm).

[www.socialdemocrats.ie](http://www.socialdemocrats.ie)

#ForThe Future  
#ItStartsHere