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# Soundings

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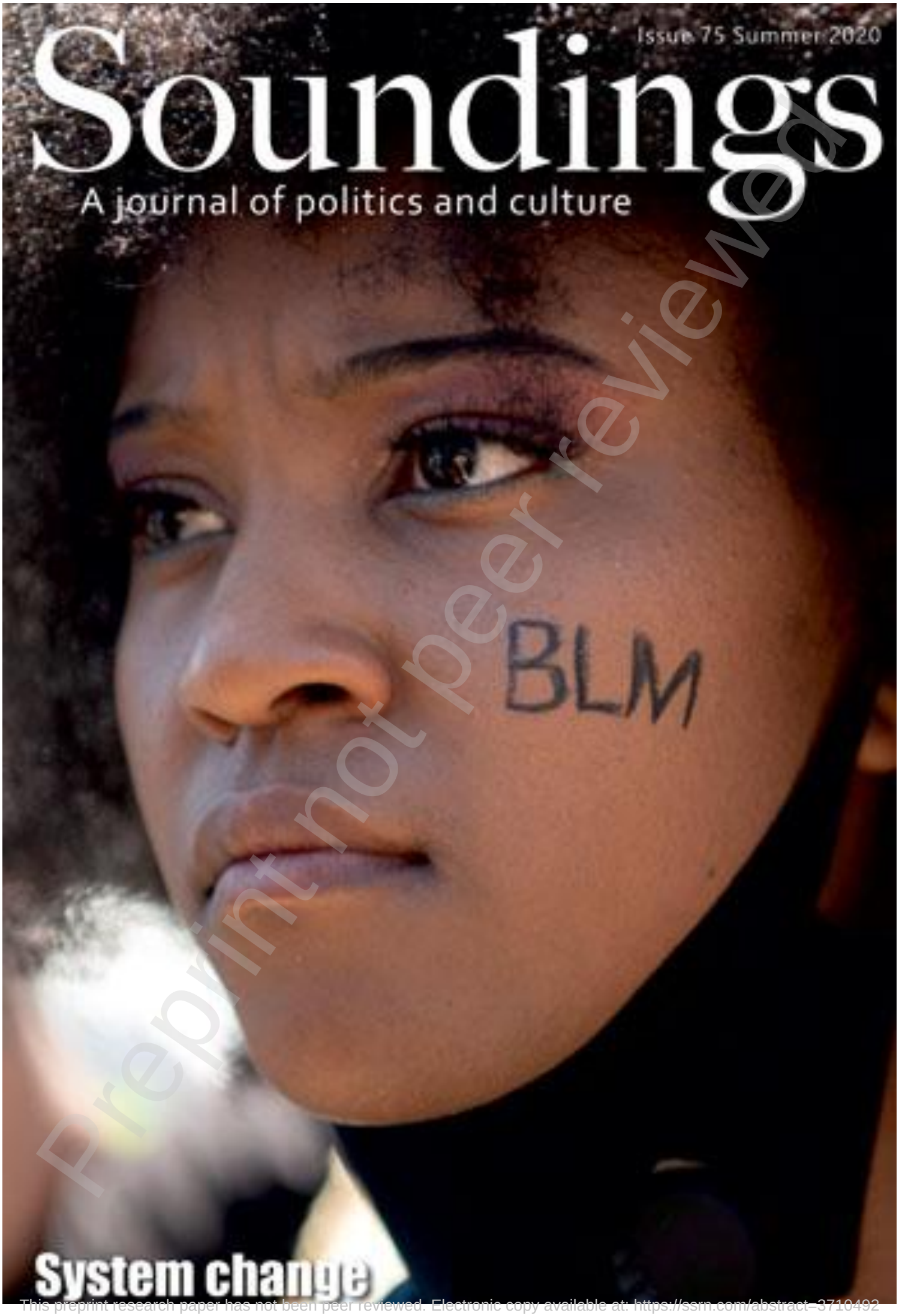


## System change

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# Contents

# Good times for a change? Ireland since the general election

Colin Coulter and John Reynolds

The hoped-for demise of the old order has not materialised, but the landscape of Irish politics is changing

For most of the last century, Irish electoral politics was dominated by the schism within the original iteration of Sinn Féin that arose from the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, which partitioned the island and led to a civil war costing more than 4000 lives. The bitter divisions from that period were to be rehearsed regularly over subsequent generations as Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael competed for power, occasionally in coalition with smaller partners such as the Irish Labour Party. But the general election held on 8 February 2020 appeared to have sounded, finally, the death knell of Ireland's 'two and a half' party system. For the first time in the history of the state, the most popular party was not one of these two centre-right formations. It was the modern incarnation of Sinn Féin that secured the highest proportion of first preferences, 25 per cent, although only the second largest number of seats, 37. Fianna Fáil polled 22 per cent and claimed 38 seats, with outgoing governing party Fine Gael on 21 per cent and 35 seats.

That level of success for Sinn Féin had seemed unlikely as recently as May 2019, when it lost half of its local council seats and two of its three MEPs. Those reversals had cast doubt on the future of party leader Mary Lou McDonald, who had been in the position barely a year, and had also ensured that Sinn Féin entered the

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general election with limited ambitions - running only 42 candidates. While that conservative approach certainly seemed warranted at the outset of the campaign, it swiftly proved short-sighted. It may well have been the controversy over Fine Gael's plans to commemorate locally recruited police forces that had served on the side of the British state during the War of Independence that gave Sinn Féin its critical initial impetus, and the surge in support for the party became ever more apparent as polling day approached. While Sinn Féin's performance was their best ever south of the border, the scale of their electoral breakthrough could have been more dramatic still. According to some commentators, had the party run as many candidates as Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, they would have gained at least eleven further seats.[1] A more ambitious electoral strategy on the part of Sinn Féin might well have altered the immediate future of Irish political life.

## The Sinn Féin shock wave?

The success of Sinn Féin in the 2020 general election was greeted as a 'shock' in many quarters, and not least among the party's republican base itself. But that reading is only partially accurate. Sinn Féin's performance - and its decisive victory among young voters in particular - partly reflects a sudden and unanticipated turn in voter preferences that might not be sustainable over time. It should also be seen, however, as emblematic of something rather more systemic and durable. What Sinn Féin's victory really tells us is just how profoundly the Irish political landscape has changed since the global financial crisis. The seemingly overnight success of the party was, in fact, at least a dozen years in the making.

When the financial crisis broke in the autumn of 2008, Irish banks that had borrowed heavily to sustain one of the most bloated property bubbles in the world were soon rendered insolvent. And as the entire Irish financial system teetered on the verge of collapse, the ruling coalition of Fianna Fáil and the Greens began channelling ever larger sums into six domestic banks, eventually totalling €64 billion. In an attempt to bridge the growing void in the public finances, the government initiated a series of austerity budgets, but even these draconian tax hikes and public spending cuts were insufficient to balance the books while the state remained committed to repaying international bondholders. As the Irish state limped towards bankruptcy, the coalition partners bowed to the inevitable

and sought emergency loans from a 'troika' of the International Monetary Fund, European Commission and European Central Bank. With the country effectively now a ward of the institutions of global finance, the February 2011 elections saw Fine Gael return to power in concert with the Labour Party. This new coalition, if anything, pursued the austerity agenda with even greater vigour, compounding the widespread misery of a time when the traditional banes of mass unemployment and mass emigration had returned to haunt the country. Of all the indices of deprivation that capture the 'troika' period, perhaps the most harrowing is that one in five Irish children was going hungry.[2]

As with all of those who advanced the austerity strategy, Fine Gael and Labour ministers insisted that the painful measures being introduced were an unavoidable necessity that would in time prepare the ground for a return to economic growth. In 2013, the government began seeking to expedite that eventuality by providing hugely favourable terms to international finance houses to invest in the country's distressed property market. Within three years, international 'vulture funds' had acquired some 90,000 properties in Ireland and become the creditors on 48,000 mortgages.[3] The arrival of these global finance houses had the desired effect on the Irish economy - helping the totemic rate of GDP growth become the highest in Europe once more - but its impact on Irish society would prove rather less benign. The vast sums invested by Wall Street private equity firms inevitably sparked another property bubble, and the particularly sharp rise in the cost of renting in Dublin placed ever greater pressure on some of the poorest in Irish society. The period that Fine Gael has spent in power since the global financial crash - after 2016 as a minority government in a 'confidence and supply' arrangement with Fianna Fáil - has seen homelessness rise to unprecedented levels. There are now a record 10,000 people in Ireland without a home, among them almost 4000 children.[4] The health system was also starved of resources during the austerity era and indeed beyond: in January 2020, it was reported that more people were on trolleys awaiting treatment in Irish hospitals than at any time in the history of the state.[5]

The events that have unfolded since the financial crisis have created the conditions of the possibility of a radical turn in Irish political life in at least two ways. First, there are many in Ireland who endured the hardships of austerity only to discover that the long promised economic upturn brought little or no improvement in their circumstances. The exit poll conducted during the 2020 election, for

instance, revealed that almost two in three voters felt that they had derived no benefit from Ireland's widely lauded 'recovery'.[6] That mood of dissatisfaction often centred on the poverty of Ireland's public services: 32 per cent of voters identified health as the principal issue during the election, with 26 per cent specifying housing and homelessness. Second, the disenchantment that pervades Ireland after a dozen years of very literal austerity and largely figurative 'recovery' simply cannot be contained within the existing political order. After all, at various stages Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were both responsible for the austerity measures that visited misery on broad sections of Irish society; and the 'confidence and supply' agreement that they operated during the last administration underscored that their 'historic' differences are precisely that. It is little surprise, therefore, that these parties are now seen as indistinguishable and discredited by an ever larger section of the electorate.

Coming into the election, there was thus a confluence of circumstances - the conviction that radical social transformation was needed, and the realisation that the prevailing political order could not deliver it - that was conducive to a shift to the left in Irish political culture. A range of political forces exist that might potentially have captured the appetite for change that had been gathering pace for some time. The mainstream party that has most often provided a channel for such radical sentiment has been Labour, and when it entered government with Fine Gael in 2011 it had talked boldly of its intention to 'burn the bondholders', asserting that it would be 'Labour's way or Frankfurt's way'. Once in power, however, that belligerence had soon dissipated and Labour had supported their right-wing coalition partners in channelling enormous quantities of public money towards international finance houses. Indeed, there were moments when the party's ministers seemed to take even greater delight than their Fine Gael colleagues in wielding the draconian power of the state to impose austerity measures. Those acts of political betrayal drew swift retribution in 2016, when Labour collapsed from 37 to 7 seats in a general election that condemned the party to the margins of political life. The Greens might also, in principle, have become the vehicle for change, reanimated by an emerging generation of voters passionately concerned about the climate crisis and oblivious of Green ministers' involvement in austerity measures after 2008. But the Greens' narrow and somewhat neoliberal approach to environmental issues left them unable to capitalise on that momentum in an election that was dominated by other issues.[7] The other force competing to harness the leftward turn among the electorate was the small group of radical socialists that had won a parliamentary foothold

as the economic crisis unfolded. In the previous Dáil, for instance, there were six representatives of Trotskyist organisations (People Before Profit, Solidarity and RISE), as well as several independents with backgrounds on the far left. The growth of the radical left has been frustrated, however, by the sequence of schisms and name changes with which it is, unfortunately, synonymous, and by the lack of a foothold of any kind outside the main cities. While five representatives of the Trotskyist groupings retained their seats in the 2020 general election, three of them might not have survived without the Sinn Féin transfers that came on the back of a seemingly spontaneous and successful 'vote left, transfer left' social media campaign in the run-up to polling day. It would appear that the advance of these political forces has been halted. As we shall see, however, the events that have played out since February may yet breathe new life into the far left.

With all these other forces on the left unable to capitalise on the appetite for change so clearly abroad in Ireland, the scene was set for Sinn Féin to record an electoral breakthrough. Their election manifesto was widely characterised as 'radical', though in fact, as Michael Taft has noted, it consisted largely of the familiar fare to be expected from any relatively 'robust' centre-left party.[8] At the heart of the document was a promise to revive Ireland's long underdeveloped public services. Sinn Féin pledged to hire 2500 more nurses and 1000 more doctors as well as to open 1500 additional hospital beds. And those ambitious targets were echoed in the party's plans for dealing with the critical issues of housing and homelessness. In a strategy devised by the most prominent socialist within the republican fold, Eoin Ó Broin, Sinn Féin promised to reduce and freeze rents for three years, empower the Central Bank to cap mortgage rates and, most strikingly of all, build 100,000 homes with public money over the next five years. Figures from the mainstream parties, predictably, dismissed those ambitions as beyond the realm of 'real world' politics. The polished delivery and command of detail that Ó Broin brought to election debates, however, made it abundantly clear that the first major public house-building programme in generations was, in fact, entirely feasible.[9]

## The republican imperative

Sinn Féin's performance in the 2020 general election was also greeted as a victory for the left. Again, this is both true and not true. The result certainly suggests that voters

in Ireland have turned steadily to the left, but the principal beneficiary of that change, in this election cycle at least, was an organisation whose leftist credentials are, at best, highly questionable: while Sinn Féin is a party that contains many socialists, it is not in fact a socialist party. The ideological lodestar of Sinn Féin remains the ending of partition and creation of a united Ireland - though these days through exclusively peaceful means. The progressive health and housing policies set out by Sinn Féin drew most of the attention during election debates, but it is worth noting that the party's manifesto identifies Irish unity as their 'core political objective'. Over time, the relationship between that nationalist imperative and the more specifically socialist ambitions harboured by the republican movement has been complex and, at times, contradictory. The Provisional IRA emerged initially as a critical response to those who had taken republicanism in a left-wing direction prior to the Troubles, but the younger, more militant figures based in Northern Ireland who came to dominate the movement after the calamitous 1975-6 ceasefire were often explicitly socialist in their outlook. And those at the helm of the modern incarnation of Sinn Féin often use the language of republicanism and socialism almost interchangeably, the anti-colonialism of one chiming with the internationalism of the other. It has always been clear, however, that when tensions arise between the demand for a united Ireland and the call for a fairer society, it is the latter that will be hastily relegated.

The inclination of Sinn Féin to dispense with their socialist principles when opportune has been starkly apparent in the party's conduct while in government in Northern Ireland. Since agreeing to share power with the Democratic Unionist Party in 2007, Sinn Féin have often appeared no less committed than their right-wing coalition partners to an explicitly neoliberal policy agenda; for example, they have embraced the Private Finance Initiative and lobbied for corporation tax to be cut to the lower rate of the Irish Republic.[10] And while they were initially opposed to the extension of the Welfare Reform Act to the six counties, they ultimately agreed to its introduction as the price of remaining in power at Stormont. This assent to a measure that has brought widespread penury to the poorest sections of Northern Irish society has inevitably raised questions about the leftist bona fides of Sinn Féin.

The ideological credentials of the party have been thrown further into doubt by the nature of its role in civil society south of the border. Over the last generation, many of the most progressive changes in the Irish Republic have resulted not from

events inside parliament but rather from popular mobilisations outside. Sinn Féin's response to this wave of social movements has often been 'evasive and equivocal'.[11] Take, for instance, the campaign to repeal the eighth amendment of the Irish constitution that outlawed abortion. Mindful perhaps of the substantial constituency of Catholic conservatism within its ranks, the Sinn Féin leadership initially avoided adopting an explicitly pro-choice position, and it was only when the social movement for change became clearly unstoppable that the party moved towards outright support for a woman's right to choose.[12]

There are, therefore, grounds for questioning whether Sinn Féin's recent electoral surge does represent the advance of left-wing politics in Ireland. Their core vote clearly came from strong working-class and youth support on the basis of key socio-economic policies, which indicates that Sinn Féin was seen as the strongest left alternative. But the conduct of the party on both sides of the border raises concerns as to what might happen should they finally enter government in Leinster House. The neoliberal policies that Sinn Féin have implemented while in mandatory coalition with a right-wing party in Belfast invite the prospect that they might do the same were they to enter voluntary coalition with a right-wing party in Dublin.

But these concerns have, in any event, now been rendered moot. Sinn Féin did seek to assemble a 'rainbow coalition' of progressive groupings in the Dáil, but the numbers fell short of the eighty seats required to form a majority government. While that had been republicans' preferred option, Mary Lou McDonald had made it clear that she was also open to talks with the two major right-wing parties. Both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael rejected this option, however, on the grounds of the associations of the party with paramilitary violence in the past, and its economic proposals in the present. (Senior figures from the two civil war parties have yet to suggest that a similar bar on office should operate during their regular trips to Stormont, where they meet Sinn Féin Ministers as a matter of course.)

It is now apparent that the long-standing Sinn Féin ambition of holding power in Belfast and Dublin simultaneously will have to await another parliamentary cycle. There is, nonetheless, much from which the party might take comfort. Sinn Féin has secured what might prove to be an enduring electoral foothold and established themselves as the principal voice of political opposition and the foremost progressive voice for workers and young people in the republic. Furthermore, opinion polls in the month following the general election suggested that the surge towards the party

had continued, reaching an unprecedented level of 35 per cent. However, a dramatic turn in world events then transformed the national context overnight.

## The coronavirus conjuncture

When the coronavirus crisis began, the inconclusive outcome of the election meant that the outgoing government remained temporarily in charge.[13] Acting Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced on 12 March that schools and universities would close with immediate effect, and by 28 March a more comprehensive lockdown was imposed with the Irish economy having come to a standstill. In order to cushion the impact, Varadkar then introduced a series of public measures of a type that he, and every other mainstream politician, had long claimed to be simply unthinkable. Those out of work due to the pandemic were supported by relatively generous welfare payments, businesses were provided with financial support to weather the storm, private hospitals were incorporated, temporarily, into the public health system, and there was to be a rent freeze and ban on evictions for the duration of the crisis.

In many other respects, however, the official response to the coronavirus crisis was fatally inadequate. The cuts to funding and personnel that occurred during the austerity era ensured that the (two-tier, semi-privatised) Irish health system was poorly prepared. The shortages of essential equipment were especially glaring in a country that hosts the overseas headquarters of nine of the ten largest pharmaceutical companies in the world - the authorities had to scavenge for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the now hyper-inflated global market. There was a failure to co-ordinate with the privatised care sector, and nursing home facilities, as in many other countries, became vectors for the spread of the virus and the site of three in every five deaths.[14] The virus also gravely impacted on direct provision centres, Ireland's own gulag archipelago, in which around 6000 asylum seekers, including 1500 children, live in cramped conditions and with minimal monetary support. But the government chose to pretend that social distancing was possible in already over-crowded facilities and excluded those seeking asylum from the pandemic unemployment welfare scheme.

Looking 'across the water' has provided a relatively flattering performance comparison: the number of fatalities per capita that have occurred in Ireland stands

at a little more than half the rate in Britain. Other points of reference, however, tell an altogether less complimentary story. For instance, if we compare Ireland to Finland - a nation with a similar population but whose public health system is vastly superior to the quasi-privatised Irish version - we get a better sense of how poorly the Dublin government has handled the crisis. The death toll in Irish hospitals and nursing homes is six times higher than in their Finnish equivalents. Perhaps an even more telling point of comparison would be with the United States. Although the Washington administration has been widely lambasted for its response to the coronavirus, at the time of writing Donald Trump had presided over only marginally more deaths, in relative terms, than Leo Varadkar.

And yet the Fine Gael leader is seen in many quarters as having handled the crisis rather well. Since the beginning of the lockdown, his ratings, and those of his party, have improved substantially. One major opinion poll published in mid-June revealed that Varadkar had an approval rate of 75 per cent, and that 37 per cent of voters intended to vote Fine Gael.[15] Sinn Féin had fallen from their post-election high, back down to the 25 per cent share they received on polling day, while Fianna Fáil had slumped to a mere 14 per cent. This resurgence may be attributed in part to a predictable but highly effective public relations campaign in which Varadkar's lack of personal warmth or charisma has been recast as precisely the stolid statesmanship that these perilous times require. But it also owes a great deal to the often baffling dearth of political opposition that has defined the period.

Those who represent the far left in the Dáil - in particular figures such as Bríd Smith, Richard Boyd-Barrett and Paul Murphy - have time and again drawn public attention to critical issues such as the threats posed to health workers by inadequate PPE, the dangers facing other low-paid workers as the lockdown restrictions are lifted, the unscrupulous conduct of companies that have used the crisis as cover to introduce mass redundancies, and the vast sums (€115 million per month) that the state is directing into the coffers of private hospitals to ease the burden on the country's malnourished public health system. But for all their energy and talent, the far left lacks the resources and profile to represent a bona fide opposition either within or without the parliamentary chamber. One might have expected Sinn Féin to play a stronger opposition role, but the party has signally failed to do so - some isolated interventions from members of its front bench aside - further underlining the very specific political priorities of the republican movement.

# Good times for a change?

When the crisis broke, Sinn Féin appeared less concerned with its implications for social justice than with its potential to advance the cause of a united Ireland. This trumping of their socialist aspirations by their republican ambitions first became evident north of the border. Sinn Féin ministers serving on the Stormont Executive insisted that their response was 'guided by the science', but it often appeared - like that of their unionist counterparts - to be shaped more by imperatives related to the 'national question'. The insistence of republicans that the public health strategy in Northern Ireland should operate in tandem with the rest of the island was inevitably countered by the unionist demand that the region should remain in step with the rest of the UK. And these ideological fault lines have produced a series of running battles between the coalition partners at Stormont - over the deployment of British troops to construct field hospitals, the balance between public health and economic recovery, the opening of cemeteries to allow the recently bereaved to mourn their loved ones, and on and on. Given the frequency and bitterness of these disputes, it remains to be seen if the power-sharing institutions only restored in January will survive the return to whatever constitutes 'normality' once the pandemic recedes.

This amplification of the republican component of the Sinn Féin agenda soon became equally explicit south of the border. Mary Lou McDonald emphasised that the ongoing health crisis had underlined the value of north-south co-operation and would accelerate the transition to a united Ireland. And she sought to burnish her republican credentials further when she insisted to journalists that the Provisional IRA campaign had been 'justified' and that had circumstances been different there was 'every chance' she would have joined the organisation.[16] While this seemingly radical rhetoric may have played well with many of the party's voters, it is also likely to have damaged their wider political fortunes, at least in the short term: Sinn Féin should have been leading the critique of the government's poor handling of the pandemic, rather than investing their energies in the less immediate priority of a united Ireland. In the absence of an effective opposition, Leo Varadkar has been able to cast himself as the 'mature' leader the public health crisis requires, and, in the process, revive the fortunes of a party that had seemed dead in the water only months earlier. We are faced with the bitter irony that while Sinn Féin enjoyed unprecedented success in the general election on a platform of radical change, the perennial propensity of the party to privilege republicanism over socialism may well mean that it has helped prepare the ground for the restoration of Ireland's political status quo.

## The more things change …

In the immediate aftermath of the general election, having ruled out entering government with Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were only too aware that they would have to swallow their pride and share power if they were to avoid another snap poll in which they seemed certain to lose yet further ground. Negotiations between the two parties began in early March and within weeks led to the publication of a 'plan to recover, rebuild and renew Ireland', intended as the basis of discussions with other parties and independents willing to act as makeweights in the proposed grand coalition. The draft document that appeared on 15 April was designed to serve two rather different - and, ultimately perhaps, entirely contradictory - purposes.[17] First, the text agreed by the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael negotiators was intended to address, or at least placate, the mood for change clearly signalled in the general election. It opens with an explicit acknowledgment that 'there is no going back to the old ways of doing things', and then proceeds to purloin shamelessly much of the Sinn Féin manifesto. Both parties express their desire to build a 'stronger, more inclusive' Ireland in which there will be a 'new social contract between citizens and the State'. Emphasis is placed on the 'importance of the well-resourced, properly functioning and responsive State', which is seen as the principal agent in the promised reconstruction of Irish society: there is an intention to place the State 'firmly at the centre of the Irish housing market', and pledges are made to establish a universal health care system. All of this is to be achieved through public borrowing, if necessary, and, supposedly, without increasing taxes or cutting social welfare.

The Keynesian strategies signalled in the joint discussion document represented an entirely explicit attempt to thwart the rise of Sinn Féin by stealing the party's clothes, and, in light of the election result, might have been included under more or less any circumstances. There is, however, a further strand to the text that is rather more contingent, reflecting the dramatic and unanticipated changes that have taken place since the general election. This second purpose is to acknowledge the unique challenges that the global pandemic poses, and to assert that the national interest now requires an 'historic coalition' that draws on the expertise and experience of the parties that have long dominated Irish political life. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael set out an ambitious project that will entail 'rescuing our economy, rebuilding our country, and renewing our society'. This enterprise of national

renaissance will centre on 'Ireland's strong legacy of having a vibrant private sector and pro-enterprise policies, and being open and attractive to foreign direct investment'. It will also be guided by the imperative of fiscal propriety, with all those ambitious projects in housing and health to be achieved, apparently, within the budgetary constraints set out by the EU.

The framework document suggests, therefore, that the incoming Irish government is to be guided by an entirely contradictory set of policy ambitions. On the one hand, the 'historic coalition' promises to borrow in order to sustain an ambitious development programme in which the state will be the engine of economic growth. On the other, it states that the revival of the economy will require fiscal prudence and the operation of free markets in which multinational corporations will exercise their powers of alchemy once more. It is, of course, depressingly predictable which of these paths the new Irish government is more likely to take.

In mid-June, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael negotiators agreed the terms of a coalition with the Greens, and this arrangement was ratified by the members of all three parties at the end of the month. The position of Taoiseach will in the first instance be held by Micheál Martin of Fianna Fáil, who will step aside for Fine Gael's Leo Varadkar in December 2022. Ireland is now led, then, by a politician who, polls suggest, commands the support of only one in seven voters. The programme set out by the new government reproduces some of the social-democratic gestures of the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael framework document, with certain Green demands on climate action added to the mix. But the document generally is so laden with caveats, ambiguity and commitments to 'review' rather than to do that it is hard to place much stock in its progressive elements. While the Greens have claimed the programme for government as 'the best green deal in the history of the country', the reality is starkly different.[18] The commitment to reduce carbon emissions by 7 per cent by 2030 is backloaded to the latter half of the decade and hence it is almost inevitable that the Irish state will, over the lifetime of this administration, continue to renege on its obligations under the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. That sleight of hand is emblematic of a programme that the coalition partners claim to be radical but is in fact anything but: its lack of new ideas or ambition on housing, its commitment to protect the private healthcare sector, and its repeated language around reducing the budget deficit through tax and expenditure measures are

indicative of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil's truer colours. It remains possible of course that, in the short term at least, the new administration will attempt to honour some of its apparently ambitious, but often suspiciously unspecific, public spending pledges in an attempt to side-line Sinn Féin. Over time, however, it seems likely that the coalition government will double down on the type of austerity programmes that people in Ireland had hoped were now, finally, behind them. The course that the coalition will take will partly be dictated by constraints arising from the economic downturn following the Covid-19 crisis. This time around the Irish state will, initially at least, be in a position to borrow on the international money markets. That may serve a limited purpose, however, given Ireland's commitment to European fiscal rules and Fine Gael's insistence on balancing the books.

The particular course that the incoming government pursues will be a matter not only of necessity, perceived or otherwise, but also of choice. In recent years, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have both implemented policies that have meant socialism for the rich and austerity for everyone else, but it is the latter that is rather more zealous in its adherence to neoliberal strategies. This means that when Varadkar resumes the role of Taoiseach in late 2022, at a time when the full economic fallout of the global pandemic will probably have begun to bite, Ireland will be headed once more by someone who is a true believer in the neoliberal project. In order to get some sense of Varadkar's Thatcherite credentials, we might recall that in the spring of 2017 - when he was, ironically, Minister for Social Protection - he launched a campaign to encourage ordinary folk to inform on their friends and neighbours suspected of using the social security system improperly, under the slogan: 'Welfare cheats cheat us all'. While he has been keen to maintain a rather more benign public persona during the Covid-19 crisis, there have been moments when the mask has slipped. In early April, Varadkar could not resist the temptation to recycle hearsay that some low-paid workers were, allegedly, abusing the coronavirus welfare arrangements. Two months later, he acted on that prejudice when he cut the pandemic unemployment payment available to part-time workers by 40 per cent.

That needless attack on some of the poorest members of the Irish workforce may prove to be emblematic of the depressingly familiar direction in which the new government is likely to take the country. As the coalition talks were nearing their conclusion, the mood music started to change and certain public agencies began to prepare the ground for potential austerity programmes. The Irish Fiscal Advisory

Council - established during the last recession to give impartial advice that always seems rather partial to the neoliberal agenda - has begun warning that some 'tough choices' lie ahead.[19] It seems inevitable that the coalition parties will take choices that are tough not for the class interests they represent but rather for the disadvantaged sections of Irish society that recently voted so emphatically for change.

While the sharpest of economic downturns and the resumption of austerity are certainly harrowing prospects, there are nonetheless some grounds for optimism on the left. In drawing up the framework document and the programme for government, the two establishment parties finally admitted that certain progressive policies which they had long insisted to be unfeasible are, in fact, anything but. While the construction of an adequate public health service or a sufficient public housing programme may have to wait beyond the lifetime of this coalition, those principles have now been conceded and will not be relinquished easily by the progressive forces in Irish society. In addition, while the onset of another phase of austerity measures seems almost inevitable, the experience from last time around means that there is an awareness that grassroots mobilisation really can win the day. Should Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael attempt - this time directly in concert - to once more deplete and privatise public services, they are likely to be greeted with more radical opposition than they faced during the previous recession.

It is of course hugely dispiriting that a general election that promised an era of change has, with the assistance of a global pandemic, led to a consolidation of the old order. But the course on which Irish political culture has been set over the last dozen years or more will prove difficult to alter, and there is every chance that when the next opportunity comes to decide a government the popular mood will have turned even more sharply in a progressive direction. Perhaps on that occasion, the main beneficiaries will even be political forces that are genuinely and unequivocally of the left.

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