

Election, Sinn Féin: Ireland's Left Turn

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Last Saturday, Ireland bucked the European trend as its voters turned sharply left. Sinn Féin was the main beneficiary, but the party has some big choices to make in the months ahead if it's going to capitalize on this breakthrough.

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It took nine years and three elections, but the economic crash of 2008 has demolished the Irish party system. The Great Recession stoked up a popular demand for change that the old political class was unable or unwilling to satisfy. On February 8, the established order collapsed under the strain as Sinn Féin overtook the dominant center-right parties, whose combined vote share slumped to an all-time low.

At a time when left parties in Europe have been losing ground to their rivals on the Right and center, the Irish election bucked the trend. Whatever Sinn Féin does next, this was clearly a left-wing vote. The exit poll showed that health and housing were by far the most important issues for voters. [1] Two-thirds wanted investment in public services to be prioritized over tax cuts. 31 percent agreed with the statement that Ireland "needs a radical change in direction".

It's possible that this opportunity for change will be squandered. But right now, the momentum in Irish politics is with the Left, and the traditional conservative parties are on the back foot. An election that was supposed to call time on the political turbulence of the last decade has had the opposite effect.

Varadkar's Gamble

None of that was meant to happen when the Fine Gael leader Leo Varadkar called the snap election in January. Varadkar's party had spent the past four years governing in partnership with its traditional rival Fianna Fáil. Both parties suffered major attrition in the first two postcrisis elections: by 2016, their combined vote share had dipped below 50 percent (in 2007, it was 69 percent). The only way for the conservative parties to stay in power while excluding Sinn Féin was through an unprecedented grand-coalition deal. Fianna Fáil didn't take any cabinet positions, but its votes kept Leo Varadkar in the Taoiseach's office.

The two parties saw this as an unnatural arrangement and wanted to get back to their long-established routine, with a center-right government facing a center-right opposition and taking turns to steer the ship of state. Varadkar thought he had a convincing message to bring to the voters: a strong economy with some of the eurozone's highest growth rates, a Brexit deal finally struck with the British government, and the promise of stability after years of upheaval. Fine Gael's average polling score in 2019 was 29 percent, and the party would only need to add a few points for a coalition government without Fianna Fáil support to be viable.

Last year's local and European elections set things up nicely as far as Varadkar was concerned. Neither he nor the Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin wanted to cut a deal with Sinn Féin, so they were delighted to see the party lose two of its three MEPs and nearly half of its councillors. The Irish Green Party, a far more tractable coalition partner, came third with its highest ever vote share. Sinn Féin seemed to be drifting in the doldrums. [2] The party's 2016 performance — 14 percent — had been its best since the 1920s, but still came as a disappointment after the polling figures of the previous year. Now it looked as if that would prove to be its electoral high point.

Mood for Change

The outcome of the election came as a shock to everyone, including Sinn Féin. The party leadership was prepared for a battle to hold onto its existing seats, and ran a defensive campaign. Before looking at Sinn Féin in particular, we need to ask why there was such a widespread mood for change in search of a political outlet.

To begin with, the much-vaunted economic recovery has never lived up to the hype. Headline figures for GDP are deeply unreliable, because multinational companies use the Irish economy as a clearing house for transfer pricing. In 2015, the official stats purported to show GDP growing by 26 percent. No government minister boasted about that "success story" — it was patently absurd — but they carried on bragging when the same questionable statistics gave a figure that sounded at least halfway plausible. The growth wasn't all fictitious, but it by-passed the majority of Irish workers. In the exit poll on February 8, voters were asked if they had felt the benefits of the recovery: 63 percent said no.

Younger people stressed the importance of housing as an issue: nearly two-fifths of those under the age of thirty-four said it was the most important factor in deciding how to vote. Runaway home prices have made it impossible for most people in that age bracket to buy their own home, while landlords hike rents to extortionate levels and hotel construction swallows up residential space.

When the Irish economy crashed in 2008, governments led by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael spent tens of billions of euro bailing out the banks and property developers who were responsible for the recession. Public money salvaged the financial and property systems, but there was no structural change imposed as a *quid pro quo*, and certainly no attempt to restore the public-housing sector as an alternative to private provision.

Now, the same banks that would have gone to the wall without state support charge interest rates well above the eurozone average, while politicians like Leo Varadkar claim that US vulture funds make a valuable contribution to the housing market. [3] It's hard to blame the shortage of affordable housing on impersonal market forces, when the people whose decisions were responsible for it have names and faces that are well known to everyone.

Out of the Past

Sinn Féin positioned itself as the party of choice for those who wanted to register their discontent. Unlike the Labour Party and the Greens, it hadn't been in government during the recession, and didn't bear responsibility for the bank bailout or cuts to public services. The party also had a much wider reach and activist base than Ireland's radical-left groups, whose support is concentrated in the larger cities. The first opinion polls revealed a surge towards Sinn Féin, which held up on election day.

It's now the largest party by vote share (24.5 percent), and level with Fianna Fáil on seats won (37 each — although Fianna Fáil has an extra seat because the parliamentary speaker is automatically reelected). The result would have been even worse for the conservative parties if Sinn Féin had known how well it was likely to perform: the Irish electoral system has multi-seat constituencies, and Sinn Féin could have picked up an extra seat in several districts if it had run more than one candidate.

When it looked as if Sinn Féin was catching up with the center-right parties, they responded with a barrage of attacks focusing on the party's links with the IRA, past and (allegedly) present. To their great frustration, none of those attacks seemed to work. There were a number of reasons for that.

The party now has a younger generation of leaders with no IRA background who've come of age over the last decade: Mary Lou McDonald, Pearse Doherty, Eoin Ó Broin. It was easier to associate Sinn Féin with the IRA when everyone knew that the party president, McDonald's predecessor Gerry Adams, had been a central figure in the IRA leadership for decades. McDonald may not be to everyone's taste, but nobody can accuse her of direct involvement in a campaign of guerrilla warfare that was deeply unpopular in the South.

Politicians and media commentators who are hostile to Sinn Féin have also reduced the force of their own arguments by linking them to an unpopular political agenda. Every time they invoked the memory of IRA atrocities, it came with an implicit addendum: "And that's why you have to put up with rack-renting landlords and a creaking health service."

That point certainly doesn't apply to everyone in the Irish media. Suzanne Breen of the Belfast Telegraph has been writing for several years about the case of Paul Quinn, a young man from south Armagh who was beaten to death by IRA members in 2007. [4] The party could have acted much sooner to retract and apologize for comments by Conor Murphy, one of its leading figures in Northern Ireland, who had suggested that Quinn was involved in criminal activity.

But far too often, genuinely harrowing cases — like that of Jean McConville — have been crassly instrumentalized by politicians in the South. [5] Those politicians are much less anxious to talk about the past when they deal with British governments whose state machine has its own grisly record of atrocities during the conflict. [6] The cynicism and double standards make it easier for Sinn Féin to deflect arguments that should cause it real difficulty.

"Wholly Political"

The other main line of attack suggested that Sinn Féin isn't really a democratic party, because its leadership still follows orders from the IRA Army Council. [7] Responses to this claim tend to be starkly polarized: people either take it very seriously or dismiss it out of hand. Let's look at the 2015 report of the British government's Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC), which scrutinizes

ongoing activity by paramilitary groups:

The structures of PIRA [the Provisional IRA] remain in existence in a much reduced form. This includes a senior leadership, the “Provisional Army Council” (PAC), and some “departments” with specific responsibilities. At a lower level, there are some regional command structures . . . PIRA members believe that the PAC oversees both PIRA and Sinn Féin with an overarching strategy. We judge this strategy has a wholly political focus. PIRA members have been directed to actively support Sinn Féin within the community including activity like electioneering and leafleting. Some PIRA members are involved in gathering information of interest to the group including details of DR [dissident republican] activities and the attempted identification of covert human intelligence sources (CHIS). A small number are involved in the storage of remaining weaponry in order to prevent its loss to DRs. Individual PIRA members remain involved in criminal activity, such as large-scale smuggling, and there have been isolated incidents of violence, including murders . . . the PIRA of the Troubles era is well beyond recall. It is our firm assessment that PIRA’s leadership remains committed to the peace process and its aim of achieving a united Ireland by political means. The group is not involved in targeting or conducting terrorist attacks against the state or its representatives. [8]

The judgement of British security agencies, on which the IMC draws for its information, should not be taken as sacred gospel. But the IMC report tallies with what we know from other sources. The statement “PIRA members believe that the PAC oversees both PIRA and Sinn Féin with an overarching strategy” is carefully ambiguous: it might be the PIRA members who are being deceived here, not the general public, just as they were deceived over the question of decommissioning in the early 2000s. In any case, that “overarching strategy” is “wholly political” and geared towards “achieving a united Ireland by political means.” The IRA that fought against the British security forces in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s is now “well beyond recall.”

Nobody seriously expects figures like Tom Murphy, for many years the leading Provisional in South Armagh, or one-time Belfast commander Brian Gillen to come out of retirement, reconstitute the IRA as a fighting force, and wage war on the British state. [9] When the Irish authorities charged Murphy with tax evasion in 2015, it was a clear signal that they no longer considered him to be a threat. [10] Sinn Féin certainly has a much better chance of achieving Irish unity by political means than through the resumption of a failed military campaign. [11]

Sinn Féin’s critics accuse the party of planning to scrap the non-jury Special Criminal Court (SCC), supposedly at the behest of its IRA masters. Originally set up to deal with subversive organizations, the SCC has since broadened its remit to cover gangland crime. Amnesty International and the Irish Council for Civil Liberties have called for its abolition.

The question of the SCC puts talk of the Sinn Féin leadership following IRA orders into perspective. The party says it wants to appoint a senior judicial figure to determine whether the court is still needed, and will go along with whatever they suggest. That means there are two hurdles to clear: first Sinn Féin would have to negotiate a coalition deal with other parties that allowed for an inquiry, then the inquiry itself would have to recommend abolition of the SCC. The Provisional Army Council can give as many orders as it likes, but the party still has to work through the same political process as everyone else.

Center on Hold

Sinn Féin wasn’t the only party competing for the left-wing vote. Its rivals can be divided into two broad categories, left-center and left-radical. The Irish Labour Party used to dominate the first of

these political niches, but it had a terrible election, winning less than 5 percent of the vote. Labour's best-ever performance came in 2011 with an anti-austerity platform, but it reneged on that platform immediately by going into coalition with Fine Gael, alienating its new supporters. Five years later, it lost thirty of its thirty-seven seats. There was no recovery this time around, just continued decline.

It's hard to see where Labour can go from here. The party seems bereft of new political thinking. The Social Democrats, a group set up by two ex-Labour politicians, now have the same number of TDs, with some fresh, newly elected faces to articulate their message. You can get a very similar center-left policy offer from the Social Democrats without any of Labour's recent baggage: we might end seeing a reverse takeover by the new party if Labour carries on treading water.

The Greens had a better day than Labour, with a 7 percent vote share and twelve seats. However, the result will have been a letdown for the party after the Green surge in last year's European election. That increased support reflected a greater sense of urgency about climate change, especially among younger people. But the Greens are a profoundly inadequate vehicle for that sentiment: Ireland's radical-left parties have a much better record when it comes to environmental issues. [12]

When the Green Party leader Eamon Ryan spoke in television debates, there was a striking discrepancy between his accurate diagnosis of the climate and biodiversity crises and the modest, incremental solutions he put forward. Ryan's party has no equivalent of the ambitious ecological programs recently developed by left-wing forces in Britain and the United States.

Radical Left

Further to the left, the Solidarity–People Before Profit alliance retained five of the six seats it won in 2016, while left-wing independents like Thomas Pringle and Joan Collins also held on — a much better outcome than seemed likely after last year's local elections. These victories often came down to fine margins, and the socialist groups might not be so lucky next time. But for now, the radical left has preserved its foothold in national politics. That means there's some breathing space to reflect on what they got right and wrong over the last decade.

At their best, Ireland's radical-left forces have punched above their weight on the wider political stage. They were centrally involved in the struggle against water charges, the most important anti-austerity movement after 2008, which mobilized huge numbers of working-class people and forced the government to scrap its plans. [13] They were also the only political actors with a consistent pro-choice policy, before the work of feminist campaigners made it expedient for the bigger parties to get on board. On both water charges and abortion rights, Sinn Féin initially took an evasive and equivocal line, and organized pressure from its left flank had a real impact. The vote for successful left-wing candidates in Dublin and Cork builds on years of activism in communities that had been ignored and abandoned by the political mainstream.

On the debit side, organizational fragmentation has made it harder for the radical left to develop a cohesive political identity and platform. In 2011, the socialist groups stood on a joint ticket as the United Left Alliance (ULA), but that broke up within a couple of years. One of the ULA's component parts, the Socialist Party, then ran candidates for election as the Anti-Austerity Alliance, which in turn became Solidarity. Even for people who follow politics closely, these comings and goings must have been very confusing.

One TV anchor asked Ruth Coppinger of Solidarity how she expected to build a mass socialist movement when her party hadn't been able to keep one of its three TDs on board since 2016 — a

cheap shot perhaps, but telling all the same. The underlying problem is the lack of a pluralist organizational culture, which means that serious political differences tend to result in splits. These problems didn't prove to be fatal this time around. However, that's no argument for complacency: if there's a fresh election in the near future, Sinn Féin will be aiming to maximize its seat share by running extra candidates, and the party would be very happy to squeeze out its socialist rivals in the process.

Ireland's radical left has a vital contribution to make, not least in developing an eco-socialist program that goes beyond the timid approach of the Greens to integrate working-class economic demands with a plan for decarbonization as the climate crisis worsens. It's very important that it retains a voice in national politics.

Primary Objectives

What will Sinn Féin do with its unprecedented mandate? The party's tactical choices will stem from its underlying political character. [14] One of Sinn Féin's star performers during the election campaign was Eoin Ó Broin, the party's housing spokesman, who represents a west Dublin constituency. Before Ó Broin became a TD, he wrote an important book, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism* (2009), which looked at successive attempts over the last century to blend republicanism with left-wing ideology.

As Ó Broin noted, his own party had a clear hierarchy of political goals, with national reunification taking priority over socialism. This meant that Sinn Féin's version of left-wing politics, "relegated to a future point in the struggle, would always be underdeveloped, as the more immediate needs of the national struggle took precedence." Ó Broin urged his party to "end the hierarchy of objectives implied in the party's ideology, policy and strategy," by putting democratic socialism on a level footing with Irish unity. However, the pecking order he criticized remains firmly in place.

It's not that there's anything reactionary or undesirable about the idea of a united Ireland. The partition settlement of the 1920s was a fiasco, and it's perfectly legitimate for Sinn Féin to want to overturn it. The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) contains an agreed mechanism for them to do so, by means of a border poll. [15] Demographic change and the Brexit crisis have made the idea of a vote in favor of Irish unity seem much more plausible than it was at the time when the GFA was signed.

But the "hierarchy of objectives" that Ó Broin described means that Sinn Féin can tack towards the left or towards the center, depending on what seems most advantageous at the time. Sinn Féin is a left-nationalist party for which nationalism comes first. This is ultimately more significant than the fact that its 2020 election program was less radical than, for example, the British Labour Party's recent manifestos, which contained more ambitious proposals for structural change through the extension of public ownership. [16]

Southern Exposure

Sinn Féin's time in government north of the border hasn't resulted in any major social-democratic reforms, yet the party hasn't paid a significant electoral price for that. However, things are likely to be very different in the South if Sinn Féin doesn't satisfy the desire for change that powered its recent surge.

In the North of Ireland, Sinn Féin is primarily a nationalist party, whose function is to represent a community that suffered many years of political exclusion. As long as it defends the interests of that

community, while promoting the long-term goal of a united Ireland, it will have a solid base of support to draw upon, however little progress it makes on a left-wing economic agenda that was never central to the party's appeal. In any case, Sinn Féin can always gesture towards the lack of decision-making powers: Northern Ireland is still a region within the United Kingdom, not a state with its own national budget.

Sinn Féin won't have the same leeway in the South: either it delivers on at least some of its pledges, or it may find its voters looking for a new home, just as Labour's 2011 electorate deserted the party after it formed a government with Fine Gael and ditched its anti-austerity program. The volatility of Irish electoral politics cuts both ways.

The most important reform promised by Sinn Féin during the election campaign was its housing platform, developed by Eoin Ó Broin, which calls for an emergency rent freeze, a cap on mortgage interest rates, and the construction of public housing on a scale that hasn't been seen for decades. If carried out, that platform would have a lasting impact on the quality of life for large numbers of people (and probably secure their votes for Sinn Féin, much like Fianna Fáil's own house-construction program in the 1930s and 1940s).

But it would also damage the interests of all those who benefit from the current setup, including the banks and the big players in the Irish construction industry. The same goes for every other social-democratic policy. To supplement their domestic power, conservative forces will also enlist the support of the European Union, whose budgetary rules they will cite as an insuperable barrier to any progressive economic agenda.

Trying to push through significant reforms in a governing alliance with the center right is the road to nowhere — especially since those parties will be anxious to cut Sinn Féin down to size by scuppering its projects and associating it with unpopular measures. Sinn Féin's well-honed sense of political pragmatism may be enough to stop the party from going down that road, even if its core ideology allows for it. At any rate, the conservative stabilization of Irish politics so ardently desired by the “stake in the country people,” as Liam Mellows once called them, hasn't arrived yet. [17]

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P.S.

- International Viewpoint. Friday 14 February 2020:
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6406>

Footnotes

[1] Irish Times February 9
<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/detailed-election-2020-exit-poll-results-how-voters-answered-15-questions-1.4167016?mode=sample&auth-failed=1&pw-origin=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.irishtimes.com%2Fnews%2Fpolitics%2Felection-2020-full-set-of-exit-poll-results-1.4167016>

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- [3] RTE 11 October 2019 <https://www.rte.ie/news/business/20...> [Irish Times 28 December 2018 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/pol...>]
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