

# A tale of two elections

■ In the Local Elections in the North on 2 May People Before Profit, who the Irish Marxist Review supports, made a major breakthrough increasing its representation from 1 councillor to 5. In the Local Elections in the South on 24 May People Before Profit experienced a setback, losing 4 seats and gaining 1, so that our total went from 10 to 7 seats. Across the 32 counties we increased from 11 seats overall to 12.

Viewed from above, as the mainstream media see things, the main story in the North is that the election shows a limited erosion of the 'hard border' between unionism and nationalism. The Alliance Party increased its seats from 32 in 2014 to 53 and its vote from 41,769 to 77,742; some of this may be due to 'remain' unionists voting Alliance and some of it to frustration at the non-functioning of Stormont. The Greens increased their seats from 4 to 8 and their vote 5,515 to 14,284. Doubtless this is part of the international green tide.

Viewed from below, from the standpoint of the left, however, it is the expansion of People Before Profit that was amazing. What made it so surprising, including to the writer of this Editorial, was that it came *after* the setback of Eamonn McCann losing his MLA seat in the very polarised election (in the unionist-nationalist sense) of January 2017 and *in the teeth* of a major propaganda campaign by Sinn Féin blaming PBP for the possibility of a hard border, which was clearly an attempt to wipe out, in terms of political representation, their rivals to their left. In those circumstances for PBP to go from 1 council seat to 5 and to increase its total vote from 1,923 in 2014 to 9,478 in 2019 is a brilliant achievement. It shows that in the North a non-sectarian space to the left of Sinn Féin continues to exist and that People Before Profit is more and

more filling it.

And when you drill down into the detail of the results they get, if anything, even more impressive. For example in the Black Mountain ward in West Belfast, PBP Councillor Matt Collins came top of the poll, ahead of six Sinn Féin, with 2,268 votes, 16.14% of first preferences. Of course this doesn't mean PBP is bigger than SF – SF won the next six seats and their combined vote far exceeds that of PBP – but it is still a stunning result. The result in the nearby Collin ward where Michael Collins polled 1,565 first preferences, and was elected in second place is almost as good. On the face of it Fiona Ferguson's vote of 447 in Old Park in North Belfast was less successful but she was operating in much more difficult territory, with a stronger sectarian divide, and the fact that she was able to win on the basis of transfers – ahead of the second DUP, the Alliance and the Greens – was also tremendous. In this context it is important to mention the result of first time candidate, Cailin McCaffery, in Court ward. Court contains both the Shankill Rd and the Falls Rd and is majority unionist. The poll was topped by 4 Unionists - 3 DUP and 1 PUP (the infamous UVF sectarian killer, Billy Hutchinson) - followed by 2 Sinn Féin. Cailin McCaffery was not elected, she came seventh in a six seater, but polled 686 first preferences – a superb result. Belfast was matched by Derry. The richly deserved election of Eamonn McCann in third place in The Moor was perhaps to be expected, given Eamonn's long record and high profile, but the addition of relative newcomer, Shaun Harkin, in Foyleside, also in third place with 977 votes was a tremendous bonus. And as in Belfast some of the near misses were as impressive as the victories. Nuala Crilly, in Ballyarnett, was a first time candidate with very few resources, but she

polled 826 first preferences and came in seventh in a six seater ahead of two Shinnners and the Alliance, and Maeve O'Neill in the Waterside, also a first timer with few resources, polled an excellent 752. In Derry and Strabane overall PBP polled 3590 first preferences.

How was this achieved? Anyone who has watched our comrades in the North in recent years will know that part of the answer is prodigious work; not just in the election itself but consistently over years, in which they engage with everything that moves on the ground in the local community. But work alone, without political strategy, is not enough and PBP had a clear strategy across the six counties of focusing relentlessly on the issue of welfare reform and Universal Credit, as a symbol of rising poverty and inequality in general, so as to put the big parties on the back foot. Importantly, this was combined with being in the forefront of campaigning over racism, sexism, abortion rights and trans rights.

Obviously the story in the South was different. The local elections were a difficult day for all of the radical left and for Sinn Féin who, we must remember, are generally seen as part of the left. Unfortunately People Before Profit lost four excellent sitting councillors (Dave O'Keeffe, Andrew Keegan, Emma Hendrick and Tony Walsh) who had served their communities well. With the victory of Adrienne Wallace in Carlow this left our total at seven. This was part of a wider pattern in which Sinn Féin lost about half of their council seats and saw their overall vote in the South fall by 6.4% to 9.5%, while they also suffered a heavy blow through the loss of Lyn Boylan in the Dublin EU election. At the same time smaller left parties such as Solidarity and the Workers Party were also hit. Solidarity are reduced to four council seats and the Workers Party who lost their key figure of Éilís Ryan in North Inner City are

down to one.

What explains this pattern? First that Irish capitalism has, in relative terms, been doing pretty well, with GDP growth rates of 5.1% (2016), 7.3%(2017) and 4.4% (2018) and unemployment falling from 8.4% in 2016 to 4.6% in April 2019. With all the caveats about the housing crisis, rising inequality and substantial desperate poverty, this means that the Irish ruling class have not felt the need, in the last few years, to mount the kind of generalised assault on working class living standards that characterised the austerity years and which produced, especially among the manual working class, both the mass water charges movement and the seething resentment which manifested in the rise of Sinn Féin and, to a lesser extent, of the socialist far left. This in turn resulted in a low turnout in manual working class areas. This was linked to the widespread feeling that there was 'no point' in bothering to vote in local elections. At the root of this is the erosion of the power of elected councillors and its concentration in the hands of Council managers or CEOs as they are now called. As a consequence it appears to a layer of working class people that 'they are all the same'. In the North Inner City of Dublin turn out in the locals was only 35.3%; in Blanchardstown- Mulhuddart 30.3%; in Ballymun- Finglas 37.7%; in Ballyfermot –Drimnagh 36.4%; and in particularly impoverished areas within these areas such as Cherry Orchard in Ballyfermot or Fettercairn in Tallaght it was lower still. This contrasts with 50.3% in Dundrum, 48.6% in Blackrock and 49.3% in Clontarf. It is very important for socialists to understand that this low turnout at the poorer end of the working class is not immutable. When there was a clear choice which they could see affected their lives such as the Repeal Referendum and before that the Marriage Equality these same people turned out in their droves. But in this election they did not and this disproportionately affected those parties whose voting base was, to a considerable extent, in this layer, ie. Sinn Féin and the socialist left. Interestingly in this election there was generally a much higher turnout in the usually more conservative rural areas

than in Dublin, eg. 53% in Bandon-Kinsale, 58.9 % in Bantry-West Cork, 62% in Donegal and so on. Another factor was the Green surge produced by the very welcome change in public consciousness about climate change and particularly influenced by the excellent school strikes (with school students influencing their parents to vote for the Greens)in the run up to, and on the day of, the election. This varied across the country but was especially strong in parts of Dublin with the Greens effortlessly topping the poll in Pembroke (where Hazel Chu polled 4069 first preferences!), South East Inner City, South West Inner City, North Inner City, Kimmage-Rathmines, and in much of Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown such as Dun Laoghaire, Blackrock and Dundrum. Much of the Green Party vote came from Fine Gael (a step in the right direction ) but some of it probably came from the left or captured the allegiance of leftward moving young people, particularly among white collar workers (teachers, nurses, office workers etc) who might otherwise have voted for the left. In some places they were able to leap frog over well established socialist or left candidates. For example without the Green surge it is almost certain that PBP's Cllr Tina MacVeigh would have topped the poll in the South West Inner City and possible that PBP's Lola Hynes would have been elected in Blackrock. Similarly in the Dublin Euro election, without the massive vote for Ciaran Cuffe, Sinn Féin's Lyn Boylan would probably have held her seat. In these rather adverse circumstances People Before Profit actually held up well – much better than more pessimistic sections of the far left – and in a few areas did very well. In Ballyfermot-Drimnagh Cllr Hazel de Nortuin came second with 1383 and the aforementioned Cllr Tina MacVeigh likewise with 938 in the South West Inner City. There were also a number of very creditable near misses such as Peter Dooley, in Kimmage- Rathmines and Annette Mooney in South East Inner City. One slightly surprising fact is that in Dublin City Council as a whole the Solidarity-PBP vote rose to 5%, up by 5.5% on 2014. If that seems counter

intuitive the explanation is that it was due to running more candidates which has the downside that there were more losing candidates but it remains a fact, and it is also a fact that the lion's share of that increase was contributed by the PBP wing of Solidarity- PBP

Two further points should be made about the Local Elections: Fianna Fail on 26.9% nationally and Fine Gael on 25.2 % made no significant advance and Labour remains mired on 5.7% - so the three main establishment parties, despite the state of the economy, are not progressing; in contrast to much of Europe the far right racists got next to nothing ( though Peter Casey got dangerously close in the Midlands – North West) and the same was true of the anti-choice traditionalists (Aontú and Renua).

Regarding the Euro elections, these were always going to be very unfavourable territory for a small party like People Before Profit. We simply did not have the resources to mount effective campaigns over such massive areas, we got very little media exposure, and we were not running high profile candidates – they were all first timers. Despite this Gillian Brien got a splendid 10,846 first preferences (ahead of Alice Mary Higgins, Ben Gilroy and Gemma O'Doherty ) in Dublin, Adrienne Wallace a terrific 14,802 in Ireland South and Cyril Brennan a very creditable 8,130 in Midlands North West. In addition three high profile left Independents, with a reputation as challengers of the establishment – Luke 'Ming' Flanagan, Clare Daly and Mick Wallace – were elected with big votes showing there is an audience for left ideas across the State.

All things considered the 24 May was not as bad a day for the left as the media and indeed some on the left are saying. Certainly, where People Before Profit is concerned the results constitute a serious base on which to build into the future always bearing in mind that, while contesting elections is essential, the purpose of the exercise is to serve and enhance the struggle in the streets, communities and workplaces where the decisive battles of the class struggle will be fought and won.

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