

The General Election and after

John Molyneux

Southern Ireland has experienced a political earthquake. The two main conservative parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, between them received just 43% of the vote. In 2007, just before the Celtic Tiger crash, they got 69%. In 1982 the figure was 84.6%.

Many now see Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael as identical twins who promote the same policies, looking after the rich and privileged. Fianna Fáil has been the dominant party in Irish politics since 1932. It occupied government office for longer than any other party in Europe, bar the Swedish Social Democrats. It received almost an equal number of votes from all social classes—about 40-45%. It had active support bases amongst primary school teachers, taxi drivers, GAA officials and a wider membership of 70,000.

The crash of 2008 broke its grip and people looked to Fine Gael as the quickest way to get rid of them. This party was the spare wheel of Irish politics. In more recent years it sought to re-configure itself as socially liberal but right wing on economics. After the Repeal movement and Varadkar's ascent to the leadership this looked like a viable strategy. Today, however, it has fallen apart as the party has slunked back to its lowest vote since 1948. At only 20.9% Fine Gael's vote barely extends beyond the richest quarter of the population.

So this is truly a political earthquake. But how did it occur?

Here we need to examine the interplay between economic cycles and political consciousness. One of the features of a slump is that the ruling class gain the upper hand as they can terrify people with the prospect of unemployment or wage cuts. The workers' movement hunkers down, goes quiet and moods of cynicism and despair emerge. However, when the recovery occurs, the resentments and bitterness that were stored up seek an explosive outlet. In the classic case of the US after the Wall Street crash of 1929, there was a terrible period of quiet

when trade union militants were victimised and their fellow workers stood aside. But by 1936, there was a huge explosion of anger and struggle among those same workers that rocked US labour relations to its foundation.

After the 2008 crash, the bank bailout and the ensuing austerity, the focus for anger was not union militancy because of the immense damage done by social partnership. Instead it took the form of the mass community based water charges movement in 2014-16 which was reflected in the election of six Solidarity- People Before Profit TDs. In 2020 it has taken a political form and its main beneficiary has been Sinn Féin.

Even in the context of the much vaunted 'recovery' and the relatively successful performance of Irish capitalism in recent years there was mass working class anger at the benefits of this recovery being concentrated in the ranks of the rich and the super rich, with most ordinary people feeling left behind. This resentment focused particularly on the chronic health service crisis and the ever worsening housing and homelessness crisis and, emerging as a major issue just going into the election, the raising of the retirement age. The fact that Fianna Fáil had been propping up the Fine Gael government through a 'confidence and supply' agreement meant that on the doors during the election campaign the mood for 'change' and to reject **both** Fianna Fail and Fine Gael was palpable.

Canvasser: "Sorry for disturbing you. We are canvassing for X of People Before Profit. We want to get rid of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael"

Voter: "Don't we all"

This was a typical opening exchange on doorsteps in working class areas. People Before Profit's overarching slogan 'Break the FF/FG cycle' fitted extremely well.

An interesting question is how Sinn Féin, that suffered significant defeats in the recent Presidential and local elections could rise so quickly again. Some attribute this to 'a learning exercise' conducted by the party hierarchy

after the local elections. However, while some learning may have taken place, it was not the fundamental reason.

Mary Lou McDonald is a very popular figure today. So it is easy to forget that her rise to leadership coincided with a drift to the right in Sinn Féin. Before her leadership, Sinn Féin had suggested that they would only join a coalition with a right wing party if they—and other left parties—were in a majority. They would not act as junior partners. Mary Lou shifted that position when she stated that she was willing to become a minority partner. To facilitate a move to respectability, Sinn Féin began to adapt to the theme of ‘let’s show understanding of the Unionist tradition’, which is dominant in the Southern establishment. Thus Sinn Féin’s Presidential candidate, LiadhNíRiada, said she would wear a poppy to commemorate the war dead of the 1914-1918 war. In a bizarre move, Mary Lou apologised for being photographed behind a banner proclaiming ‘England Get out of Ireland’ in the St Patrick’s Day Parade in New York. While much of this was symbolic, at a more substantial level Sinn Féin Councillors began to work more closely with the unelected local authority chief executives, sometimes even supporting the sale of public land.

If they had gone into this election stressing their willingness to be junior partners with Fianna Fáil, they would not have gained so much. They succeeded, however, because they tapped into the subterranean anger in Irish society.

When there is pent up anger in society, the smallest spark can set it off.

One of those sparks was the bizarre and stupid attempt by the Fine Gael Justice Minister, Charlie Flanagan, to commemorate the RIC (the Royal Irish Constabulary) and, by extension, the Black and Tans, legendary for their brutality in their attempt to block Irish independence. This had two effects on the wider population. It re-awoke memories as to why the vast majority had supported the War of Independence to drive out the RIC and the Black and Tans. But crucially, it also demonstrated how out of touch a small coterie of Fine Gael leaders and the network they inhabited among Dublin 4 heads, straddling the *Irish Times*, RTE and the academic hubs, were with the mass of the Irish people. Suddenly, there was an enormous outburst of rage which forced the cancellation of the proposed ceremony.

That in turn coincided with a wider awakening of the

population to the reality of a partnership of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil that, despite all their self-congratulation about a recovery, had not delivered for most working people. Sinn Féin’s talent was to catch this mood quickly by stumbling left.

People Before Profit were the first to talk about the need to ‘Break the Cycle’ of endless Fianna Fáil/Fine Gael rule but it was Sinn Féin, with a bigger platform, that was heard. Similarly, People Before Profit were the first to point to the French strikes and raise the demand for a restoration of the pension age to 65. But, Sinn Féin, which had agreed to the rise in the pension age in the North, also took up the theme—and was heard. None of this is to cavil at or begrudge the Sinn Féin victory. It should be celebrated as a significant move to the left in Irish society.

Moreover, the scale of the Sinn Féin surge was massive, up 10.7 per cent, from 13.8 to 24.5 per cent, on their 2016 result. Of the ten candidates who received the highest numbers of first preference votes nine were Sinn Féin – the only exception being Michael Healy-Rae in ninth place. In heavily working-class Dublin South Central, Aengus Ó Snodaigh polled a spectacular 39.3 per cent. Clearly this dramatic upsurge took not only the establishment and the commentariat completely by surprise but also Sinn Féin themselves, otherwise they would have stood far more candidates as in constituency after constituency their vote was large enough to bring in two TDs.

Those who voted for Sinn Féin saw it as the enemy of the establishment and gave their second preferences mainly to Solidarity-People Before Profit. In Dublin South Central Ó Snodaigh’s huge surplus transferred 57 per cent to Bríd Smith and saw her elected on the second count.

But, while Sinn Féin shifted left during the election, they will still seek to revert to their original strategy—namely to get into coalition with Fianna Fáil, thinking that is the best way to push for a border poll. Thus, after speaking to left parties including Solidarity-People Before Profit on a possible minority government, Mary Lou has moved quickly to open discussions with Fianna Fáil about coalition. Eoin Ó Broin announced that Sinn Féin cannot govern without the participation of Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael.

However, the political establishment despise Sinn Féin and are worried about the radicalising effect that

even talk of a minority left government might have. They think that Sinn Féin have not yet demonstrated sufficient loyalty to the institutions of the Southern state—perhaps typified by the party’s muddled response to the issue of the Special Criminal Court. Significantly, the Irish stock exchange began to wobble even with mere talk of a minority left government. The fear of further radicalisation in the population will probably drive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael together into a grand coalition. But it will be met with huge anger that will explode onto the streets. The period of Southern ‘stability’ is over.

Other features of the election are worth mentioning. First, the dismal failure of the far right. The fascist National Party, led by Justin Barrett (formerly of Youth Defence) polled 0.2% overall and only 4,773 votes across the country. The Irish Freedom Party, led by the aptly named Hermann Kelly, and by Ben Gilroy, formerly of Direct Democracy and the Irish Yellow Vests, did better: they got 0.3% of the vote nationwide. The notorious Gemma O’Doherty, standing as an independent in Dublin Fingal, was among the more successful far right candidates but still polled only 1.97% (1252 first preferences) and it was particularly satisfying to see the pathetic performance of Peter Casey. With money no object, Casey who had polled over 20% in the Presidential election on the basis of anti-Traveller racism, arrogantly stood in two constituencies – his home base of Donegal and Dublin West (again chosen for its migrant population). The result – only 1,143 first preferences in Donegal and a miserable 495 in Dublin West.

The exit poll figures for voting by the 18-24 age group make disturbing reading for all the establishment parties.¹

Fianna Fáil:	13.6%
Fine Gael:	15.5%
Sinn Féin:	31.8%
Green Party:	14.4%
Labour Party:	2.6%
Social Democrats:	4.1%
Solidarity-People Before Profit:	6.6%

Only among the over 65s was any party other than Sinn Féin in the lead – Fine Gael- and did Labour even reach 5%. And in Dublin constituencies Fianna Fáil polled 14.3% to Solidarity-PBP’s 6.5% and Labour’s 5.9%.²

Overall the radical left did relatively well. We did not poll quite as well as in 2016 when we were riding on the crest of the water charges wave but we did better than might have been expected on the basis of the local elections or the opinion polls, and certainly better than the pundits or the bookies were predicting. Solidarity- People Before Profit retained 5 of its 6 seats, only Ruth Copinger being defeated, and Catherine Connolly, Thomas Pringle and Joan Collins were also re-elected. People Before Profit held all three of its seats, with Richard Boyd Barrett topping the poll in Dun Laoghaire, Brid Smith coming in second in Dublin South Central and Gino Kenny getting in Dublin Mid-West despite Sinn Féin running two candidates (who came first and second). It was also very welcome that Paul Murphy, formerly of the Socialist Party now RISE, retained his seat comfortably in Dublin South West. People Before Profit had some other good results with young first time candidates such as Eoghan O’Ceannabhain getting 3.53% in Dublin Rathdown and Conor Reddy getting 3.75% and coming, amazingly, close to winning in Dublin North West.

Another feature of the election was that the activism of the People Before Profit membership, combined with a significant input from Northern comrades who came down to help and careful marshalling of resources resulted in very large canvassing teams in the key constituencies – much bigger than those of rival parties. And all of this work was given a significant boost by Richard Boyd Barrett’s strong performance in the main television Leaders’ Debate.

A minority Left Government

After the election the concept of a **minority** Left Government, again pioneered by People Before Profit, was also vital. It challenged, and challenged very successfully, the easy dismissal of the Left with the casual ‘the numbers aren’t there’ and kept the Left centre stage. It enabled us to go on the front foot in demanding that FF/FG listen to the electorate and step aside and increase the pressure on Sinn Féin not to do a deal with FF. It held up the exciting prospect of a Left Government enacting emergency legislation to reduce retirement age to 65, to stop evictions and the sell off public land, to enact the Climate Emergency Measures Bill, to raise the minimum wage etc. while defying FF/FG to vote such mea-

sures down and face an angry electorate. It also facilitates the possibility of mass mobilization on the streets against Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in the next few weeks

The vote for Sinn Féin leader, Mary Lou McDonald, for Taoiseach was the concrete expression of this strategy and the fact that Solidarity-PBP were supported by Independents Joan Collins, Catherine Connolly and Thomas Pringle was further testimony to the strategy's success. This also had the effect of exposing the Social Democrats, who had been trying to talk left but who shamefully abstained, for what they are – Labour for slow learners.

However, despite this immediate success, it is clear that the idea of being part of a left government would pose major problems for socialists down the line. Revolutionary socialists understand that there is no parliamentary road to socialism. Simply forming a government in the Dáil does not give that government real power. Real economic and political power will still be concentrated in the boardrooms of the big banks and corporations and the unelected officials of the capitalist state – the judges, police chiefs, generals and senior civil servants. Moreover, the ruling class will not hesitate to use that power to thwart and wreck any attempts by a radical parliamentary government to challenge the system.

Faced with any serious threat to capitalism the ruling class can and will engineer financial crises, take their money out the country, go on investment strike, provoke business closures and create unemployment, secure court rulings against radical policies and use the state apparatus to suppress working class mobilization on the streets and in the work places. While at the same time organising a concerted media campaign to blame all the economic and political difficulties, caused by this right wing sabotage, on the Left Government itself.

The recent media attacks on Sinn Féin, assisted by the intervention of 'non-political' Garda Commissioner Drew Harris, and Varadkar's ridiculous idea that Sinn Féin holding public rallies are an attempt to 'bully and intimidate' the Irish people, give us a small hint of what this might look like. So does the, eventually successful, British media campaign against Jeremy Corbyn. Look out for those anti-Zionism equals anti-Semitism slurs to start gaining momentum here.

Faced with such orchestrated assault the 'Left Government' would have a stark choice: retreat on its radi-

cal policies and go back to running the capitalist system as 'normal' or go onto the attack against the collected bankers, landlords, bosses, police chiefs, judges, media barons etc. through the mobilization of the working class in monster street demonstrations, mass strikes, and workplace occupations. In short either deploy revolutionary methods and push in the direction of a revolutionary conclusion – the dismantling of the existing order and the conquest of power by the working class – or the surrender of all serious radical ambition.

Unfortunately the experience of numerous left governments over the last century, from the social democrats in the Weimar Republic to the ANC in South Africa and Syriza in Greece shows that the latter outcome is far more likely than the first.³ And it is clear from the experience of Sinn Féin in the North as well as any dispassionate analysis of Sinn Féin policies and practice in the South, including their reluctance to engage in mobilization from below and their willingness to contemplate coalition with Fianna Fáil, that a Sinn Féin led government would not be at the radical end of the spectrum of left governments. It might try to enact some reforms but it is not about to challenge capitalism.

The problem is that for People Before Profit or any real socialist party to be trapped in such a Government that was in fact trying to run capitalism would be to commit political suicide. Capitalism only operates according to the economic laws of capital and that means profit has priority. For People Before Profit to go along with this, as we would have to as part of such a government, would be to utterly disappoint and betray our members and voters who, naturally, are those most demanding of real change. We would face the fate of the Labour Party only more so because our supporters would, quite rightly, have higher hopes and aspirations.

So does it follow from all this that to campaign, as we have done, for a Left government, is a short sighted mistake? Not at all. Everything said at the start of this article about the benefits of this demand stands. What follows is that we should *actively support* the formation of such a government **without actually taking ministerial posts**. This is perfectly possible and we have taken the first step by voting for Mary Lou as Taoiseach. The next step would be to say to Sinn Féin, and anyone else involved, that our red lines for actually joining the government would be policies that really challenge cap-

italist power. In the likely event of these radical socialist policies being rejected we would continue to defend the government against attacks from the right, supporting any progressive measures it might take on a case by case basis, while at the same time leaving us free to oppose, including by militant working class action, any back tracking, cut backs or anti-working class measures it might seek to impose.

In this context it is important to understand that the very establishment of a Left government may raise the hopes, expectations and confidence of the working class, leading to a surge in struggle from below which both supports the government and moves beyond the limits which it is comfortable with. This is what happened with the election of the French Popular Front government in May 1936 which lead directly to the great general strike of French workers in May-June of that year. It is what happened with the establishment of Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government in Chile in 1970 which led to mass popular and industrial action including the establishment of industrial *cordones* (embryonic workers' councils) in 1972. Of course this episode ended in catastrophic self-induced defeat at the hands of General Pinochet's military coup in September 1973, but that reinforces the argument for socialists maintaining their political independence in a way that was not the case in Chile.

In politics there tends to be an exception to every rule and to the general rule that socialists should not join governments under capitalism there is the exception of when such a left government is formed in the middle of a revolutionary upheaval which is actually threatening the power of the state. In such circumstances it may be the correct course of action but obviously that does not apply right now. In Ireland today the correct strategy is to call for and support the formation of a left government without becoming trapped in it. Moreover, these political initiatives at the level of government must be combined with the mobilization of people power at the base. At the time of writing the first steps have been taken in this direction with the call for a mass demonstration for real change and against the formation of a Fine Gael/Fianna Fáil government on 7 March.

In pole position

When we consider both the election and its aftermath it

is evident that People Before Profit is emerging from this whole episode in pole position on the Irish Left. We grew during the election campaign and are growing now. In the immediate future we can grow further. But in politics nothing should be taken for granted and success brings with it serious responsibilities. This opportunity must be seized, which involves sustained work to sink deeper roots in working class communities, trade unions and workplaces. And this must be done on a cohesive and integrated 32 county basis. Ireland's greatest socialist, James Connolly, had the vision and the goal of a workers republic, a United Socialist Ireland, but he lacked the political organisation to achieve this goal. We share Connolly's vision, which is again coming into its own after a century of reactionary partition, and we have at least a chance to build the necessary organisation.

Notes

1 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/exit-poll-by-numbers-who-voted-what-way-and-where-1.4166978>

2 <https://www.irishtimes.com/election2020/results-hub>

3 For a survey of that experience see John Molyneux, 'Understanding Left Reformism,' *Irish Marxist Review* 6, <http://www.irishmarxistreview.net/index.php/imr/issue/view/6>.