



Flying Under a False Flag—Why the Green Party Fails

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The Green Party are now over two years into their second stint in government and—unsurprisingly to anyone familiar with their first stint in government—it is not going well. The government is beset with multiple crises; the housing crisis worsens by the day, with new records for homelessness set on a regular basis; the health service continues to crumble, with record waiting lists, massive staff shortages, and the threat of further Covid-19 waves as we enter winter; there's an intensifying cost-of-living crisis with spiralling inflation and seemingly continual energy price hikes; climate measures have proven inadequate and the government repeatedly fails to meet even these targets; and all this on the back of the continuing war in Ukraine, which has seen many in Irish politics and the media launch a fresh attack on Irish neutrality and attempts to deepen our involvement in EU military operations and cosy up to the US and its NATO allies. Only a few years after their best ever local and general election results, the Greens have plummeted in opinion polls, and all indications are that they are on course to repeat the electoral annihilation that marked the end of their last stint in government. How have the Green Party ended up in this situation, slavishly propping up the two traditional parties of government, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, while achieving nothing tangible for their troubles?

Organic growing pains

Let's take a brief look at the history of the Greens. The Green Party was initially formed as the Ecology Party of Ireland in 1981, with their inaugural meeting promising 'a radical alternative to both capitalism and socialism.' In addition to their environmentalism, they also put forward some policies that were essentially social democratic in nature—and certainly to the left of the then growing neoliberal consensus of the Reagan and Thatcher era—such as a universal basic income. The party grew slowly throughout the 1980s and 1990s, gaining their first councillor in 1985, their first Dáil seat in 1989, and a pair of European Parliament seats in 1994. In the early 2000s, the party made significant electoral gains, with six TDs elected in 2002, followed by eighteen councillors in the 2004 local elections (although they also lost both of their MEP seats at the same time).

During this period, the Greens were involved in campaigning on numerous environmental issues, such as the Shell to Sea campaign against the Corrib gas pipeline, the campaign to reroute the M3 motorway away from the Hill of Tara, and opposition to

the construction of the Ringsend incinerator. In addition, the party was involved in antiwar activism around the invasion of Iraq and the use of Shannon Airport by the US military. The Greens also campaigned for no votes in the referendum on the Maastricht Treaty as well as both referendums on the Nice Treaty.

The party's growth was not entirely straightforward, however, and it underwent significant organisational change over this period. In common with many green parties internationally, the Irish Green Party has often contained conflicting views on the way forward for the party, in particular a divide between those more focused on grassroots activism and campaigning versus those with a more electoralist approach. While the party has contested elections since its founding, there existed a number of members and local groups who focused more strongly on campaigning and some who were opposed to electoral politics. These tensions played out in the renaming of the party as the Green Alliance in 1983/84, with an accompanying change in their organisational structure from a centralised decision-making apparatus to a decentralised one with more local decision-making and autonomy for local groups. Most of those opposed to the electoral approach left in 1986, with the party adopting its current title, the Green Party, in 1988.¹ Despite the apparent victory of the electoral wing of the party, the Greens still resisted some of the trappings of traditional Irish political parties, and it was only at a special leadership convention in 2001 that they formally adopted the position of having a national leader, when Trevor Sargent was elected to the position.

First as tragedy—the 2007 election

The Greens approached the 2007 general election with a strong emphasis on entering government, with a manifesto entitled *The Green Party in Government ...it's time*.² The manifesto's contents gave an oblique indication of how far they were prepared to go for a seat at the cabinet table; the document almost entirely lacked political commentary, and bar a few brief opening paragraphs, it outlined a somewhat 'middle of the road' set of policies and crucially no concrete commitments on many of the key issues they had previously campaigned on. There was no mention of the Shell to Sea campaign, despite party leader Trevor Sargent having spoken at a Shell to Sea press conference the previous year supporting the campaign's call for an independent commission into the Corrib deal—even going as far as to state that it was 'comparable, in historic terms, with the Act of Union of 1800, in the way a dodgy deal can be made to look legitimate.'³ Opposition to the routing of the M3 was reduced to a pledge to 'respect existing road contracts but, where there is concern about potential damage to communities, environment or heritage, [we] will investigate how this can be minimised within the scope of the contract or through renegotiation.'

There were some positives in the manifesto reflecting the party's previous positions, such as their stance on US Military's use of Shannon: they pledged to 'end the use of Shannon Airport by US military forces involved in the war in Iraq' [emphasis in the original] and defend Irish neutrality, including calling for a referendum to define it in the constitution. There were also

modest environmental proposals, like a 3 percent annual cut in carbon emissions and continued opposition to incineration of waste, a promise to link the lowest social welfare payments to 50 percent of per person average income, a five-year banking levy of € 200 million a year, as well as the usual pledges to increase social housing, hospital beds, and public transport.

Overall, however, in keeping with the party's 'neither left nor right' approach, the manifesto was a confused affair that displayed the worst sort of muddled thinking around market approaches to public services. On housing and planning there were pledges to build social and affordable homes and promises to implement windfall taxes on development land and ensure that local authorities compulsorily purchased development land prior to rezoning, but also a policy to encourage institutional investors to enter the rental market. On communications there were pledges that the Greens would carry out a feasibility study into the state's retaking control over Eircom while divesting any commercial operation, keeping only the fixed-line network, and 'setting the mobile phone operators, cable companies and Eircom into direct competition to get cheaper, faster and more integrated broadband services.' On health they stated they were 'not opposed to private hospitals per se,' and in a standout, deliberate misunderstanding of the nature of private businesses and the profit motive, they proposed they could provide 'facilities to the public sector on a not-for-profit basis.'

The party's campaigning during the election followed a similarly contradictory approach. The campaign was critical of the outgoing Fianna Fáil and Progressive Democrat coalition, with then party chairman John Gormley declaring at their 2007 party conference, 'Let there be no doubt, we want Fianna Fáil and the PDs out of government,'⁴ and Trevor Sargent repeatedly stated that 'I won't be leading the Green Party into coalition with Fianna Fáil' but also that he would be open to negotiation 'with all parties'—a position that many commentators pointed out was clearly contradictory.⁵ One of the media's highlights from the campaign was a confrontation between John Gormley and the Progressive Democrats' leader (and Gormley's constituency rival) Michael McDowell, which they dubbed the 'rumble in Ranelagh.'⁶ During a press conference at which McDowell erected a poster with the slogan 'Left Wing Government? No Thanks,' Gormley angrily approached him to take issue with what had been written about the Green Party in Progressive Democrat election leaflets, mainly disputing the claim that the Greens would increase corporation tax. Of course the claim the Greens wanted to increase corporation tax was as unfounded as the possibility of a left-wing government that had so incensed McDowell, with the only policy on corporation tax included in the Green's manifesto being one lower the rate in the North to equal that in the South. The manifesto also proposed a lowering of employers' PRSI contributions—already one of the lowest in Europe.

The election did not result in any gains for the Greens, who emerged with the same number of seats (six), with Fianna Fáil remaining the largest party, although their coalition partners in the Progressive Democrats suffered heavy losses, including

Michael McDowell, while the main opposition alliance of Fine Gael and Labour failed to gain sufficient seats to form a government. On the day of the count, Green TD Ciarán Cuffe, clearly seeing how the electoral calculus had panned out, mused on his blog that 'a deal with Fianna Fáil would be a deal with the devil. We would be spat out after 5 years, and decimated as a Party. But...would it be worth it?'⁷ He never answered the question, but the Greens entered coalition talks with Fianna Fáil.

Negotiations were dutifully completed and a programme for government consisting of Fianna Fáil, the Greens, the Progressive Democrats, and independents was agreed and presented to a meeting of the Green Party, where it was approved with an 86 percent yes vote—despite including very little of what the Greens had previously advocated, even in their very moderate manifesto. In a rare instance of an election pledge (albeit a strange one) being promptly fulfilled, Trevor Sargent resigned his position as leader and was replaced by John Gormley, and the following day they voted to make Bertie Ahern taoiseach, taking two ministerial positions in the new government: Gormley as minister for the environment, heritage, and local government, and Eamon Ryan as minister for communications, energy, and natural resources. Trevor Sargent was appointed as minister of state at the Department of Agriculture, again technically fulfilling another of his pledges during the campaign, that he would not sit in cabinet with Fianna Fáil.

Of course the new government was quickly overtaken by a recession following the collapse of Lehman Brothers—not to mention the collective chickens of the Celtic Tiger and the associated property bubble coming home to roost—rendering the adopted programme little more than aspirational prose. As the crisis deepened, talk of a 'soft landing' and 'sound fundamentals' gave way to the realisation that the Irish banks were on the verge of collapse, and by September 2008, Fianna Fáil minister of finance Brian Lenihan had announced a blanket guarantee for the six largest banks, followed in December by plans to recapitalise AIB, Bank of Ireland, and Anglo Irish Bank—which would later be nationalised. The National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) was established in late 2009 to take bad loans off the banks' balance sheets—funded by borrowing. The Greens 'put on the green jersey,' talked of the national interest, and voted in favour of these measures. They also voted in favour of a series of budgets and mini-budgets which introduced a series of austerity measures, including new income and health levies (which later morphed into the Universal Social Charge), cuts to social welfare, and public-sector pay cuts. Green TD Paul Gogarty defended the party's stance during a debate on the social welfare bill for Budget 2010, saying, 'It's regrettable but necessary,' and that 'everyone on this side of the house is going to stand by it, because it has to be done'⁸—even as some Fianna Fáil backbenchers voted against their own party.

With the arrival of the troika⁹ and a bailout in late 2010, it was clear the government's days were numbered and the Greens called for a general election to be held in late January of 2011. Even then, John Gormley was keen to stress that before an

election he wanted to secure EU/IMF funding, produce a four-year plan to balance the state budget, and pass a budget for 2011.¹⁰ After taking part in negotiations with the EU/IMF and agreeing to the four-year plan of austerity, including € 6 billion in cuts for Budget 2011, they staggered on until, in the wake of revelations surrounding taoiseach Brian Cowen's undeclared contacts with figures in Anglo Irish Bank and cabinet resignations from Fianna Fáil and Mary Harney (then an independent, following the demise of the Progressive Democrats as a party in late 2009), they finally pulled the plug and left government on 23 January 2011.¹¹

When a general election was eventually held, in March, the ruling parties saw their votes collapse. The Green Party received only 1.8 percent of the vote, dropping below the 2 percent threshold for state funding, and was left without a single representative in the Oireachtas for the first time since 1989. So with Ciarán Cuffe's prediction of electoral destruction and burn out, what did the Greens have to show for it? The Corrib pipeline went ahead, with Eamon Ryan the minister responsible; John Gormley signed foreshore licences for the Ringsend incinerator; the M3 went ahead as planned; and US troops continued to use Shannon Airport. They promised a bank levy, yet delivered a bank bailout with no bondholder, even the unsecured, left behind. Promised social welfare increases were replaced with cuts, and public services suffered greatly. Carbon emissions did indeed temporarily fall in the following period, but as a result of a biting recession rather than a climate policy. Civil partnership legislation was passed, but this enjoyed cross-party support, so the Greens were hardly required in government for its adoption. They did achieve one of their climate-related goals with the introduction of a carbon tax in Budget 2010, but the regressive nature of the tax, which applies to the end user, and the lack of affordable alternatives to carbon-emitting energy sources for many, particularly the poorest, means it continues to be a problematic and controversial measure to this day. Similarly, NAMA ended up acting to bailout some of the largest developers while creating cheap deals for others, such as Project Cerberus's sale of much of its Northern Irish portfolio. Likewise, the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation, which was set up to work out the loans of the nationalised Anglo Irish Bank, was mired in controversy over many of its deals, like the sale of Siteserve to Denis O'Brien.

If the Greens' time in government should be remembered for anything, it's that when it came down to it, they were willing to vote for multiple austerity budgets and commit the state to several more in order to get loans from the troika to bailout the banks and pay back bondholders, all to maintain the financial markets and the capitalist status quo.

Catching a wave

Following their electoral wipeout, there was little indication the Greens had changed their basic approach—they maintained they did what was necessary in the national interest—and following John Gormley's resignation as leader, they elected his fellow former minister Eamon Ryan as leader. As opposition to the new

Fine Gael/Labour government began to take shape, boosted by the election of five left-wing TDs in the United Left Alliance as well as left and left-leaning independents, the Greens were nowhere to be seen. This is perhaps not surprising given that campaigns against the household charge and later against property tax were agreed to in the deal Fianna Fáil and the Greens signed with the troika and that, in line with their market-based approach to environmentalism, they supported water charges—even in the face of one of the largest mass protest movements the country had seen in decades.

The Greens did, however, have one thing going for them in recovering from the 2011 election: the existential threat from climate change continued to grow. As ever more alarming scientific reports were published, the Greens began to reappear more regularly, often serving as the go-to party for many media reports on issues around the climate. In the 2014 local elections, they had their first successes, with eleven councillors elected—including former junior minister Ciarán Cuffe—although Eamon Ryan failed to take a seat in the European elections. As climate change continued to receive even more coverage, particularly in the wake of the Paris Agreement in 2015, the climate movement was reinvigorated and the Greens managed to capitalise on this—beginning to grow and recruit new members eager to push for the radical action needed to tackle climate change. This growing movement helped the Greens during the 2016 election, which saw Eamon Ryan and new deputy leader Catherine Martin win seats. The election also saw the Fine Gael/Labour government replaced by a minority Fine Gael/Independent Alliance government backed from opposition by a confidence and supply deal with Fianna Fáil, which opened the field for other opposition parties to take the lead in criticising government policy.

As awareness of the true scale of the climate crisis continued to grow with reports from the likes of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), increasing extreme weather events, and ongoing climate inaction—not to mention the disastrous policies adopted in some countries, like the US under Trump and Brazil under Bolsonaro—we witnessed the emergence of ever more radical climate action campaigns like the Fridays for Futures school strikes and Extinction Rebellion. While these movements were often to the left of the Greens, with a much greater emphasis on the role of the capitalist system in driving climate change, the Greens still continued to capitalise and grow further, a trend that only increased as they continued to rise in opinion polls. This resulted in a much larger party with a much more pronounced left wing, who also demanded action on issues other than climate change, like the housing crisis.

The 2019 local and European elections saw the Greens win forty-nine council seats and two MEPs. Such was the groundswell in support that they also picked up an additional Dáil seat later in the year when Joe O'Brien won a by-election in the Dublin Fingal constituency.

Second as farce—the 2020 election

In the run up to the general election in early 2020, it was clear that the long decline in the share of the vote going to Fianna Fáil

and Fine Gael was continuing, while Sinn Féin were gaining in popularity, making the election a three-way race for the position of largest party. It was also clear that the continued fracturing of the traditional two- or two-and-a-half party system was likely to result in a messy government formation process, with a multitude of possible coalition arrangements looking like mathematical possibilities.

The Greens went into the general election looking likely to make gains and quite possibly to be in a position to make up the numbers required to be in government. They made no secret of their desire to be in government again, and Eamon Ryan stated throughout the campaign that they would talk to all parties about forming a government. Their manifesto, titled *Towards 2030: A Decade of Change*,¹² reflected this, putting the need to tackle climate change at the centre of all their policies. They promised 7 percent annual cuts in carbon emissions, a ban on licences for fossil fuel exploration and extraction, a ban on the importation of LNG, a massive investment in offshore wind energy, and a Just Transition Commission to ensure a fair transition to a low-carbon economy. There was a lot of talk about building up indigenous business to reduce reliance on multinationals, but very little in terms of concrete proposals that could deliver their goal of ‘making sure that our enterprises serve our society and the environment and not just their own short-term interests.’

Many of the non-climate promises in the manifesto very clearly reflected the wishes of their more radical members and a desire to win over voters looking for real change on key issues such as housing and the health service. With this in mind, the manifesto pledged a programme of building public homes on public land and a single-tier health service funded by general taxation.

Between the proposed climate actions and housing and health policies closely resembling those of parties on the left of the spectrum, the overall effect was that many Green members and voters saw them as being left wing, and they were often included in the lists of left-wing candidates in various areas, with the slogan ‘vote left, transfer left’ becoming popular during the campaign.

The election resulted in Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and Sinn Féin all roughly level, but with no immediately clear option for a government. The Greens became the fourth-largest party, ending up with their best ever result and twelve Dáil seats. Negotiations on government formation began immediately, but ended up being very protracted, particularly with the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic. Eventually the Greens agreed to back an historic coalition of the two main right-wing parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and a programme for government was agreed. Reflecting the new makeup of the party, there was some dissension in the ranks of the parliamentary party, with three TDs abstaining on a vote to present the programme to the party membership.

Before the membership voted on the deal, TD Roderic O’Gorman said that in the event of the other parties not carrying through on the commitments contained in the agreement, ‘We can bring the government down.’¹³ The Greens head negotiator during the talks, Catherine Martin, invoking the national interest

and apparently forgetting the financial crisis that marked their last period in government, justified the deal by claiming, ‘We are in the midst of a period of immense and unprecedented challenge. We face a seismic economic setback the like of which has never been experienced before. We need to work together for our country.’¹⁴ The programme for government was eventually agreed by the party membership on 26 June, with a 76 percent yes vote.

Dissension in the ranks did not end here however, and several members, including high-profile candidate Saoirse McHugh, left rather than join the coalition. Other members, including TD Neasa Hourigan, who had opposed the coalition, formed the Just Transition Greens, a group within the party who professed a green-left/eco-socialist outlook. Since Green Party rules require a leadership election after a general election, one was held, with Eamon Ryan and Catherine Martin standing—the outcome was remarkably close, with Ryan winning by only forty-eight votes. This was widely seen as reflecting the internal dispute over the coalition in the party, with Martin seen by many as more likely to stand up for their policies and deliver on a just transition. The Greens’ internal woes continued throughout the remainder of the year, with many more departures, including four councillors, two of whom went on to form a new explicitly left party, An Rabharta Glas—Green Left.

So what have the Greens achieved this time round? The answer, on the back of their best ever general election result and holding the balance of power in probably the most fractious Dáil to date, is not much.

On climate the Greens much-vaunted climate bill¹⁵ is failing; having promised 7 percent reductions each year, they settled for a target of 4.8 percent a year, but actual emissions rose in 2021 by 5.4 percent. Agriculture gets away very lightly in terms of reduction targets, and there are no measures to decrease the national herd, which continues to grow year on year. The carbon tax from the previous Fianna Fáil/Green government remains and has been increased again, although the latest increase has had to be offset by cuts in other fuel levies, providing ample evidence that the tax itself is no more than climate window dressing. Eamon Ryan described the decision to offset as an ‘appropriate measure.’¹⁶ When it comes to offshore wind, the government’s new Maritime Planning law is entirely developer-led, with no provision to force development once a licence has been granted, allowing developers to sit on sites as they increase in value.

The failings when it comes to the government’s handling of the ongoing pandemic could fill several articles in their own right, but a particular stand out failure is the refusal to back the use of HEPA filters to mitigate the risks of transmission in indoor settings—particularly when the Green manifesto promised to ‘roll out indoor air quality sensors and dataloggers in all public buildings for people vulnerable to cardio-respiratory problems, including school classrooms, patient areas in hospitals and care facilities, nursing homes and other relevant institutional buildings, and make the results publicly available on a website.’¹⁷ Elsewhere in health, waiting lists continue to grow

and there has been no progress on resolving the recruitment and retention crisis that has plagued the health service.

Record levels of homelessness and ever increasing rents speaks to the failures of the government's housing policies—they're a long way from the public homes on public land promised in the Green manifesto. The Greens have long championed local decision-making and transparency in planning, but An Bord Pleanála is embroiled in ongoing controversy over conflicts of interest and questionable planning decisions. The government have responded by attempting to limit the public's ability to initiate judicial review cases around planning, despite the fact that of the forty-four cases decided since 2018, thirty-two have been successful, strongly suggesting the problem lies with the planning authority and not the number of court cases taken.

The war in Ukraine has presented an opportunity for those in government who wish to abandon neutrality, and yet despite their stated position, the Greens voted against a People Before Profit bill that would have enshrined neutrality in the constitution.¹⁸ Despite stated support for the Palestinian cause, the Greens also voted against the Occupied Territories Bill, which would have banned trade with illegal Israeli settlements, with TD Joe O'Brien saying it would be 'more useful for the Palestinians over the next four years' for him to remain as a junior minister than to vote for a bill which was likely to fail.

As the cost-of-living crisis deepens and an energy crisis looms, with threats of blackouts over the winter,¹⁹ the government's response has been marked by inaction. Instead of taking on the energy companies making record profits while repeatedly raising their prices, they have proposed limited energy credits which will go straight to the companies. Instead of acting to reduce energy consumption, they continue to allow new energy-intensive developments like data centres; in fact, when South Dublin County Council voted to ban the construction of new data centres in the area on foot of a People Before Profit motion, the housing minister overruled the council.

In short, the Green Party's second term in government is shaping up much like its first; when it comes to the difficult choices, they will choose to protect big business and their profits over the rest of us every time.

Conclusion

So what is it that leads the Greens to behave like this? It is not simply that they are 'bad people'; I don't doubt that their TDs feel bad when they vote against something they actually support or vote through measures they know are harmful or inadequate. Neither are they stupid; they knew quite well what joining this government would entail—they have not only their own previous stint in government to go on but the records of numerous other coalitions; they are willing to face the prospect of another electoral drubbing when the time comes. The answer to why they repeatedly sell out and betray their professed principles lies in their ideology.

By their ideology, in this case, I do not mean their environmentalism. I mean their capitalism. The Greens are utterly wedded to the capitalist system and committed to operating within its structures. They fully accept the restrictions of capitalist markets with their drive towards competitive accumulation, and will not take any action that might interfere with it. We see this time and again, whether it is a reluctance to deal with spiralling rents or an unwillingness to go after the profits of energy companies.

Capitalism operates on the basis of competitive accumulation and all businesses are forced to follow this market logic or fail. Governments under capitalism are not immune from this logic; they might be able to make some changes here and there or slightly trim some of the worst excesses of the market, but they cannot fundamentally change it. Usually a few threats of foreign direct investors pulling out or warnings of a dip in GDP are enough for them to sound the retreat.

The limits placed on governments by the system is, of course, not a surprise to Marxists, and they are a large part of the reason we believe real change doesn't come from within parliament but from mass struggle. This is a position borne out by history: the most significant societal changes are always driven by mass action, from civil rights movements to revolutions and anti-colonial struggles—the change needed to end the capitalist system's absolute dependence on fossil fuels certainly feels like a struggle on par with any of the greatest in history.

This is not to say that governments cannot affect significant change; left governments and even social democratic ones can at times provide real meaningful change for their populations—think of the British Labour Party and the establishment of the NHS. They cannot, however, fundamentally alter the nature of the capitalist system from within. In general, they are limited to expanding direct state provision of services, which while not immune from market forces, can at least ensure access isn't based purely on ability to pay and act to keep prices in various sectors in check by setting a floor—as with the provision of social housing.

Of course, entering a coalition with right-wing parties with a very recent history of privatising state assets is a very different story, and it is here that the Greens want to be, as they put it on their website, 'our Green voices...in the room, at the decision-making table, where we need to be.'²⁰

More radical members of the Greens may feel they have a voice within the party while they are in opposition, but once the party enters government, it quickly becomes a very cold house for them. A party so utterly subservient to the capitalist system simply cannot deliver the type of change needed to solve the climate crisis or any of the other myriad crises facing us, like housing or health.

The Greens are such a party, and as their history has shown us, the only way²¹ they will ever be red is in the sense of the capitalist system: red in tooth and claw.

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