

# Sinn Féin's Southern Strategy

## The Long March to the Centre

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14 Outside the glare of publicity, Sinn Féin (SF) leaders have embarked on a new project. They are meeting business lobby groups and multinational firms to offer an assurance that a Sinn Féin led government will be supportive. In September 2022, Mary Lou McDonald travelled to Silicon Valley to meet senior executives from Google and Salesforce. She said that ‘winning FDI [foreign direct investment] and strengthening our business relationship with the US will continue as a key component of Ireland’s economic strategy.’<sup>1</sup> Housing spokesperson, Eoin Ó Broin has met landlord lobby groups and builders. Pearse Doherty, the party’s Finance spokesperson, summed up the message when he claimed that big business has nothing to fear from a Sinn Féin government. “They know that Sinn Féin isn’t going to go after them,” he said.<sup>2</sup>

And the party has some work to do. Firstly, its voting base is skewed towards the lowest social class. In advertising jargon, lower paid workers are referred to as the C2DE classes. In a poll taken in March 2022, Sinn Féin was scoring 47 percent in this category compared to a mere 13 percent for Fine Gael.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally Fianna Fáil (FF) and particularly Fine Gael (FG) have relied on a cohort drawn from developers and upper professionals – accountants, barristers, auctioneers, among others. A shift to a Sinn Féin led government would naturally cause a certain anxiety. Secondly, there are different factions within the upper class and different avenues into wealth. A large section of the indigenous Irish rich has invested heavily in property. These are worried about how some Sinn Féin policies might affect their property portfolios.

Thus, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) recently prepared a slideshow for clients, advising them to speed up asset sales and boost pension pot contributions before Sinn Féin comes to power.<sup>4</sup> Thirdly, Sinn Féin sometimes defines itself as a leftist party and at European level is a member of the radical left grouping, GUE/NGL. More significantly, in recent years it has adopted policies that appeal to a working class base by stressing the need for government intervention in the market. In brief, Sinn Féin currently occupies a contradictory position. To enter government, it must win a sizeable chunk of working class votes by promising real change from the hundred year dominance of FF and FG. But as it has no intention of uprooting the power of wealth and capital. Instead, it wants to work with big business to minimise any hostility from within the elite. This is a difficult balancing act best summarised by Pearse Doherty when he spoke at the Dublin Economic Workshop - a gathering of right wing economists. Sinn Féin, he claimed, had not moved to the centre, but the centre "has moved decisively towards Sinn Féin".<sup>5</sup> It was a neat rhetorical twist, but the substance of both formulations was similar. Sinn Féin sees itself as occupying the new centre of Irish politics.

Party strategists are more than aware of these contradictions and have developed mechanisms by which they think they can be overcome, at least in the short term. There are three key elements to their thinking. One lies in a quiet jettisoning of specific left wing policies while continuing a vaguer radical rhetoric. The second, is using the cover of establishment hostility to neutralise left wing warnings about potential coalition with Fianna Fáil. The third involves an implicit encouragement of working class passivity rather than mobilisation. Let's look at each in turn.

### **Policy shifts**

Sinn Féin is primarily a nationalist movement whose core objective is the unification of Ireland. The type of Ireland or the class that dominates have always been secondary issues. Its rhetoric can therefore shift left or right depending on the situation, but there is one important limitation. While the modern Sinn Féin grew out of a split with the supposedly leftist Official Sinn Féin – a party that adopted a Communist Party inspired strategy of reform in the six counties – it first won a base in the working class communities of the North. The original strategy of the republican movement was a purely military one as the IRA focussed

on bombing city centres and assassinating members of the security forces. Inevitably, after a working class upsurge over Bloody Sunday in 1972, support for this strategy waned in the 26 counties. In 1997, for example, Sinn Féin scored just 2.5 percent of the Southern vote, even after the peace process had begun. More importantly, it was only able to increase this vote to 7 percent before the economic crash of 2008.

The party soon realised that to grow it had to combine its traditional nationalism with a distinct appeal to workers in the South. It understood that the upper professionals were wedded to the comfort of the 26 county state, and it needed working class support to advance. They had followed a similar left turn to challenge the SDLP in the north and so the core slogan of Sinn Féin in the South became ‘Giving workers and their families a break’.<sup>6</sup> The flexibility inherent in nationalism meant that the actual content of that slogan could change, however, and in recent years, the rate of change has accelerated. At one level the orientation to the poor and to workers is a longstanding aspect of Irish republicanism. Even when Sinn Féin defined itself as anti-communist in the early 1970s, it promoted seemingly radical economic policies. Thus *Éire Nua*, the political programme inspired by

Ruairi O’Bradaigh, and Dáithí Conaill, contained the following statement,

We are opposed to personal ownership of productive property such as a large farm or a large factory. This type of ownership involves the exploitation of other people’s labour for personal gain and is alien to republican principles. This type of enterprise should be co-operatively owned. Private enterprise will have no place in key industries and our incentives will favour co-operative projects as the most socially desirable. Only resident citizens shall be allowed to have a controlling interest in an Irish industry.<sup>7</sup>

There was a clear contradiction in restricting a controlling interest in industry to Irish residents and the wider claim that all personal ownership involved exploitation. This blatant discrepancy barely mattered, however, as *Éire Nua* was viewed, even by its own supporters, as a form of window dressing to accompany a military strategy that had total primacy. A seemingly more militant leftist language arose with the ascent of the Adams-McGuinness leadership. The IRA was declared to be a socialist organisation and, in a document, written for the IRA known as the ‘Gray Document’, Adams argued,

Furthermore, with James Connolly, we believe that the present system of

society is based on the robbery of the working class and that capitalist property cannot exist without the plundering of labour. We desire to see capitalism abolished and a democratic system of common or public ownership. This democratic system, which is called socialism, will, we believe, come as a result of the continuous increase of power of the working class.<sup>8</sup>

This rhetoric was designed to accompany a new phase of the IRA struggle after the experience of the H-Block campaign. Adams' argument was that the South was a neo-colony of Britain and hence the revolutionary armed struggle centred in the North was in the vanguard of a wider struggle to break the grip of colonialism. In his book *The Politics of Irish Freedom*, he spelled this out. The Southern state, he argued,

Developed a neo-colonial relationship in which it was possible to protect [British] economic and strategic interests without the nuisance of having to occupy, garrison and administer the 26 counties. The economy of the 26 counties is dominated by foreign capital; massive proportions of the profit generated in Irish industry are exported in particular to Britain. The resources of

the state are controlled and exploited by foreign interests and even the ruling class is not based principally on native capitalism but is an agent class, acting as agents of foreign capital.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike the more idealistic economic strategy of *Éire Nua*, this seemed to offer a harder analysis that attracted many leftists to the movement. That there was little evidence to justify the argument that the South was a colony of Britain barely mattered.<sup>10</sup> The republican movement, it was thought, offered a way by which Ireland could become the Cuba of Europe.

Yet this perspective also faded away when, after 1989, republican strategists suggested that the US – freed from its rivalry with the USSR – could play a 'progressive' role in an Irish peace process. And as a nationalist party, Sinn Féin was not overly concerned about US imperialist activities elsewhere – only Irish unification mattered. A significant turning point came when Gerry Adams, who once denounced 'capitalist exploitation', welcomed George Bush to the North even as he was launching a brutal war in Iraq. The slide to a more moderate political outlook had begun.

However, the central strategic objective remained. How to win a popular base in the South by becoming a voice for working class aspirations. The rhetoric shifted to a more Keynesian type of reformism whereby the state regulates capital in the interests of workers. There are, however, varieties of Keynesians. On the left stand those who argue for a redistribution of wealth to increase working class demand. On the right, stand those Keynesians who suggest that fiscal measures that do not affect wealth concentration are needed. As Sinn Féin moves closer to government, it has adopted a more conventional Keynesian position which it hopes will not frighten business. It has watered down some of its most progressive tax demands and welcomed changes to the European union fiscal rules.<sup>11</sup>

Early indications suggest it has achieved some success. Thus, the ratings agency S&P has re-assured business leaders that ‘the Republic’s openness to trade and its flexible labour market ... will remain in place ‘regardless of the election outcome in 2025’.<sup>12</sup> The *Irish Times* has perceptively added that Sinn Féin’s ‘policies are not viewed, internationally at least, as a radical departure from what we’ve had up to now’.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the multinationals are more comfortable

with Sinn Féin’s assent – even if some Irish property owning upper professionals are more than a little worried.

It is instructive to note how exactly Sinn Féin has shifted its policy decisions to appease business interests. Let’s itemise them in turn.

**Corporation Profits:** In 2006, Sinn Féin suggested that Corporation Tax should be increased to 17 percent and claimed this would not be punitive.<sup>14</sup> More recently, the party has supported the 12.5 percent rate and now backs the establishment party consensus that it should rise slightly in accordance with OECD guidelines.

**Wealth Tax:** In 2011, Sinn Féin called for a 1 per cent Wealth Tax. It stated that, ‘This would be an income-linked Wealth Tax for high-earners levied on their assets over €1million in value, excluding working farmland’.<sup>15</sup> In 2023, Sinn Féin dropped their demand for a wealth tax.

**Capital Gains Tax:** In 2011, Sinn Féin called for an increase in Capital Gains Tax to 40 percent. This is a tax on the gains from the sale of assets that have increased in price. In 2021, the party merely asked that ‘consideration should be given to reform’ Capital Gains Tax.<sup>16</sup> In 2023, this disappeared from Sinn Féin’s alternative budget altogether.

**Income Tax:** In the past, Sinn Féin proposed a 7 percent levy on incomes above €100,000. It then became a 5 percent levy on income over €140,000. This has since been reduced to a 3 percent levy on income over €140,000. Pearse Doherty has assured high earners that it will not really hurt, claiming that those earning €150,000 will pay just €300 more in tax.

**Mortgages:** In 2020 the party manifesto called for ‘giving the Central Bank power to cap mortgage interest rates.’ It noted that in 2015, Sinn Féin brought forward legislation that would allow the Central Bank to cap mortgage interest rates charged by Irish banks.<sup>17</sup> In 2023, the party dropped this policy and instead proposed a limited subsidy for mortgage holders.

All of this represents a distinct shift in economic policy, but it should not be exaggerated. There is still a score of tax measures on *passive* wealth. Thus, the party favours a 5 percent stamp duty on properties valued at over €700,000, an increase in commercial stamp duty and an increased tax on share buy backs. It wants a second home tax of €400 and an increased capital acquisitions tax. It wants to scrap the notorious Special Assignee Relief Programme that offers tax concessions to individual foreign executives, for, among other things, sending their children to private schools. But while these proposals are welcome, they are extremely modest and do not hit

at the core of the profit making machine. Specifically, they are not targeted at capital where it is deployed for productive purposes. Or put slightly differently, none of these measures will upset big corporations even if some of their individual agents are somewhat upset.

On one level Sinn Féin is being consistent. Despite its left credentials, the party has never spelled out ways by which the economic power of capital could be lessened. It has repeatedly failed to call for the nationalisation of banks or private hospitals. Even at the height of the Covid epidemic it never challenged Big Pharma on their use of intellectual property to restrict access to vaccines. It refuses to challenge EU directives such as the forced ‘liberalisation’ of the electricity market by calling for an end to privatisation and the restoration of a not-for profit ESB mandate. Many of the most recent shifts have flown beneath the radar because the party continues to speak left while quietly accepting the logic of ‘capitalist realism’.

This ‘realism’, however, may turn out to be built on shaky foundations. One of the main reasons why the party has been able to appear more radical and yet not tackle the power of wealth is that it assumes that the current government surplus can be distributed more equitably. In other words, it thinks there is no need to discuss real wealth distribution when the state coffers are so full of the receipts

generated by its functioning as a tax haven. The problem here – leaving aside the political immorality of supporting a tax haven -is that this appears to be coming to an end. Globally, receipts from corporate tax dodging are dropping and an international recession looks to be looming. If these trends continue, Sinn Féin’s balancing act of promoting a little more equality while appeasing big business can easily fall apart.

### **Opening to Fianna Fáil**

After the Electoral Commission increased the number of Dáil TDs in August 2023, a flurry of speculation began in the media about the composition of the next government. The most common prediction was a SF-FF government. An *Irish Independent* poll claimed that ‘Support for Sinn Féin forming a historic coalition government with Fianna Fáil has grown as political parties begin their preparations for the next general election.’ This was based on poll figures which showed 42 percent backing this option (But rather significantly the poll also suggested that another 42 percent wanted to exclude Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil from government).<sup>18</sup> In Belfast, the *Irish News* ran the headline, Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil edge towards a deal’. It wrote,

It is almost a century since Fianna Fáil was founded as the result of a bitter split with Sinn Féin, and both

sides have taken up diametrically opposing stances throughout the course of their subsequent histories. However, there are now increasing indications that the rivalries could be finally set aside after the next Irish general election through the creation of a new coalition arrangement between the two groups.<sup>19</sup>

One could dismiss this as media speculation or even a deliberate attempt to set the political agenda. However, there are good grounds for thinking that this is the trajectory of Southern Irish politics for two main reasons. First, Fianna Fáil is split on the issue of coalition with Sinn Féin. Despite Micheál Martin’s bitter rhetoric about Sinn Féin ‘infecting’ the minds of the young, half his own party have declared a preference for joining in coalition with Sinn Féin. One government minister who spoke anonymously told the *Journal* that the party is split down the middle. ‘Fifty per cent of the party would find going in with Sinn Féin extremely difficult. The other half would have done it the last time around.’<sup>20</sup> The *Irish Times* has also reported that 20 Fianna Fáil TDs support coalition with Sinn Féin, including senior figures such as Jim O’Callaghan, who has stressed the need for the party to refurbish its clientelist base among workers.<sup>21</sup> Party leader Micheál Martin is angling for a job in Europe and should he depart, the prospect of Fianna Fáil embracing a

future coalition with Sinn Féin dramatically increases.

Second, Sinn Féin strategists are also attracted to the option. One reason is that by staying open to this possibility, it attracts vital second preference votes. It also makes it easier to isolate Fine Gael (FG) as the real ideological right and win voters accordingly. SF strategists are also keenly aware of how the party managed to replace the SDLP in the North as the main nationalist party. It sees Fianna Fáil as their equivalent in the South and thinks it can eventually gobble up this divided and aging party. There is also a much bigger consideration. Namely, by playing a conventional electoral game, Sinn Féin can argue that on mathematical grounds they have little choice. If they win close to 70 seats in the next general election, they can look to Fianna Fáil as their minority coalition partner. Moreover, the presence of Fianna Fáil would help to ease Sinn Féin's entry into the establishment. It would add an assurance to big business on top of the policy shifts already made and insulate it against any further pressure from the left.

The problem is that many Sinn Féin supporters are vehemently opposed to this opening. They know that FF and FG have dominated the country for one hundred years and want a government that finally excludes them. To deal with this sentiment, Sinn Féin has constructed

a rhetoric which is repeated like a mantra by its leading spokespersons. David Cullinane sums up the position as 'Obviously after an election, we'll talk to all parties. The ideal preference would be a government without Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael. Obviously, that is in the hands of the electorate'.<sup>22</sup> Sinn Féin's message to its working class electorate is that it wants a government without FF or FG. But it does not describe this as a left government as this would indicate political incompatibility. It merely asserts that this is an 'ideal' and, realistically, it will stay open to looking to Fianna Fáil as Fine Gael have already ruled this option out.

This rhetoric is flawed, however, as it gives no guarantee to a disillusioned electorate that they can shape government policies. Labour and the Greens have already gone to the country with radical sounding programmes only to claim later that these become irrelevant as they become bound by coalition programmes for government. Even if Sinn Féin moved more to the centre there is a basic incompatibility between their apparent policies and that of Fianna Fáil. The latter party have a long record of corruption and favouritism for business cronies. They have been major players in constructing a neoliberal Ireland where there are weak public services for working people. And even as minority partners in coalition, Fianna Fáil would block any vestige of radicalism in Sinn Féin's agenda. They would act as the watchdogs for privilege,



engaging in regular blackmail to sink a SF-FF government if it dared to upset the elite in any way. This is why no less a figure than Bertie Ahern can claim that FF would hold its own as a minority partner in such a coalition. He noted ironically that ‘the revolutionaries of today are usually the conservatives of tomorrow.’<sup>23</sup>

If Sinn Féin were to rule out coalition with FF in advance of an election, this would add a new dynamic to Irish politics. It would send out a clear signal that the party is determined to bring real change. It would galvanise those sections of the electorate ground down by cynicism and convey a message that this time around there will be a difference. It would offer hope to the many young people who are considering emigrating because of the housing crisis. If such a move were combined with a real effort to establish Vote Left-Transfer Left rallies, across the country, it would draw thousands of new activists into a Corbyn style movement. The fact that Sinn Féin are fearful of such a move indicates that their real intentions are very different. They want to slot into an Irish establishment that makes minor changes for working people.

## **Passivity**

Politics can take on a life of its own which party strategists cannot control. A crucial factor here is the degree of working class mobilisation which can create new discourses and aspirations. Good examples of this phenomenon are the water charges and Repeal movements in the last decade. The water charges movement drew tens of thousands of working class people out of passivity and cynicism. In so doing, it laid the ground for a shift left in politics. The Repeal movement inflicted a decisive defeat on the bishops and rendered their agenda of control over sexuality obsolete. However, clever manoeuvring by Fine Gael meant that it did not lead to a full break with the fake liberalism that characterises the modern day Irish establishment.

Sinn Féin, however, has little sympathy with a project of creating mass movements. Its whole history indicates a deep cynicism about people power. In the past, the party functioned as a support unit for the IRA. The armed campaign was defined as the ‘cutting edge’ of a movement which would drive Britain from Ireland. Even when there was a mass response to Bloody Sunday, with the burning of the British Embassy, the only advice republicans offered was join the IRA. Later during the H-Block campaign which also garnered significant

support in the South, the advice was to approach Fianna Fáil's grassroots for backing. The idea that workers could act in support of political prisoners did not appear on the republican agenda. It took the small forces of the revolutionary left to galvanise support for worker walk outs in Dublin, Waterford, and Dundalk.

This history of armed struggle substituting for a mass movement, has been re-configured today. Now it is asserted that a Sinn Féin led government will bring the change. Workers need only wait until change comes from on high. If anything, the implicit message is that too strong a dose of working class militancy might upset the electoral advance of Sinn Féin. Best to discourage criticism and avoid advocating militancy. This studied moderation almost wrong-footed Sinn Féin during the water charges campaign. For a period, they refused to endorse a campaign for non-payment until the mass of people forced them to change their opinion.<sup>24</sup>

It is not as if Sinn Féin has created working class passivity in the South, but rather that they echo the trade union bureaucracy and have strategically set out to replace the Labour Party as its main voice. Here the key structural process which underlines working class passivity in the South is social partnership. Once again, the party has

moved from an ambiguous attitude to supporting the process whereby union leaders do deals with employers and government that effectively avoids industrial action in favour of national dialogue. In 2005, for example, Sinn Féin featured a debate between leading opponents and proponents of social partnership at a conference in Dublin. At the time, party spokesperson, Austin Morgan, said that the process 'is not in the interest of workers and it was not designed to deliver for the disadvantaged and the low paid'. He went on, however, to hold open the prospect of a different form of social partnership if Sinn Féin ever became the government.<sup>25</sup>

In more recent times, prominent Sinn Féin trade union officials such as Anne Speed or Louise O'Reilly in SIPTU have become ardent supporters of social partnership. They have advocated deals whereby workers give up their right to take strike action except in limited circumstances. The focus of Sinn Féin has been on promoting progressive union legislation in the Dáil. Thus, they have proposed increases in the minimum wage, bans of bogus self-employment and a legal right of workers to collective bargaining. While these are welcome, they do not promote working class self-activity. Instead, the party sees industrial disputes as a problem and calls for

greater support for the Workplace Relations Commission. Thus, it writes that,

The best way to avoid industrial disputes is to have genuine engagement and respect for all sides. Sinn Féin recognises the Workplace Relations Commission as a vital piece of our industrial relations architecture and would allocate additional resources to it in order to secure and maintain its role in arbitration and dispute resolution.<sup>26</sup>

It does not publicly back groups of workers such as the water workers or ESB workers who have taken industrial action against the advice of SIPTU leaders. The problem here is that social partnership has been a disaster for workers. Union membership in the South has dropped from 33 percent of workers in 2005 to a mere 22 percent today. The fall among youth and those in the private sector is even more pronounced. The last pay deal for public sector workers saw a settlement which amounted to a pay cut as workers gained a 3 percent rise while inflation raged at over 7 percent. And while a major strike wave has broken out in the North, the confidence of Southern workers has dropped to an all-time low.

There is, of course, an inverse relationship between worker confidence

and a prospective new government. The more workers engage in real struggle, the more the parties claiming to advance their interests are tested. The less they struggle, the more parties can rely on a general rhetoric while encouraging workers to wait for change from on high. The Sinn Féin message of waiting for ‘progressive change’ to be delivered via a new government clearly finds an echo in the current situation.

### **Can the balancing act last?**

Various factors, therefore, assist Sinn Féin in maintaining its support base while shifting to the centre. The party’s strategists have devised ways it can still be seen as a radical alternative even while shifting policy discreetly. Its openness to a Fianna Fáil coalition is masked with a declaration that it would ‘prefer’ a government that excludes them in an ‘ideal’ world’ which they think will never exist. The party receives a substantial hearing because of the sell out of the Labour Party during the years of austerity and due to the more recent decline in struggle in the South. While Sinn Féin is by no means responsible for this, its strategic objective is to develop a close relationship with a union bureaucracy that has found a comfortable niche within Southern institutions. None

of this, however, is to suggest that Sinn Féin's balancing act is guaranteed success. Instead, there are substantial dangers ahead.

The first arises from how wider geopolitical conflicts impact on Irish politics. For many liberals, the transition to Joe Biden represented a return to normality compared to the presidency of Donald Trump. In reality, Biden has not only continued US foreign policy, he has accelerated attempts to restore US imperial hegemony, particularly over China. As this journal has previously argued, Putin's invasion of Ukraine was viewed by the US as an opportunity to restore its leadership of the 'free world'. It is recovering from its ignominious defeat in Afghanistan by fighting a proxy war against Russia and demanding full support from its EU allies. One result has been a growing pressure for greater EU militarisation and synchronisation of its foreign policy to dovetail with that of the US.

These wider moves have put Sinn Féin under pressure. As a prospective party in government that wants, as Mary Lou McDonald indicated, close relations with the US, it cannot be seen to take an overtly anti-imperialist position in global conflicts. Sinn Féin's policy on neutrality has, therefore, undergone subtle changes. The party remains committed to the

general concept of neutrality, defining it as an aspect of national sovereignty. But it has also begun to re-define neutrality in more general terms. Thus, the party has dropped its opposition to Partnership for Peace, a NATO programme to tie non-members into a closer relationship with it. The NATO website states that it is

a programme of practical bilateral cooperation between individual Euro-Atlantic partner countries and NATO. It allows partners to build up an individual relationship with NATO, choosing their own priorities for cooperation... (it will), build strengthened security relationships between NATO and non-member countries in the Euro-atlantic area.<sup>27</sup>

The party has also dropped a commitment to undo PESCO, which Fine Gael has pushed through. PESCO or Permanent Structured Co-Operation is an EU inspired programme which commits governments to increase military spending to 2 percent of GDP and to develop 'interoperability' with other EU armies. As Ireland currently spends just 0.4 percent on defence, this will mean a fivefold increase – from about €960 million to about €4.5 billion annually. In 2020, Sinn Féin stated that PESCO was the first step in the creation of an EU army and that 'in Government, we will ensure Ireland plays absolutely no part in PESCO'.<sup>28</sup>

However, Matt Carthy, SF foreign affairs spokesperson, now argues that:

Ireland's future participation in Pesco and Partnership for Peace must also be assessed based on those principles (underpinning neutrality) and should never undermine our capacity to continue playing an important role in UN Peace Keeping missions.<sup>29</sup>

The *Irish Times* has captured the rationale that lies behind Sinn Féin's shift of position. As part of its preparation to join a government - possibly with Fianna Fáil - the party is re-defining its relationship with the EU as the tectonic plates of global politics are shifting towards greater imperialist competition. Here is the paper's description of Mary Lou McDonald's performance in the Dáil when Ursula von der Leyen appeared.

Sinn Féin's approach to the European Union has evolved significantly. Mary Lou McDonald's recent Dáil speech, in response to the Oireachtas address by European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, illustrated this very clearly. The note that McDonald struck on the EU was so positive that her script, subject to a few tweaks, could have been delivered by Micheál Martin or Leo Varadkar. She spoke warmly about the positive achievements of the EU and about von der Leyen. In particular, she was

markedly warm not only about the EU's solidarity with Ireland since Brexit, but also about the EU's strong response to Vladimir Putin's aggression in the Ukraine.<sup>30</sup>

The repositioning of the party has accelerated during the current crisis in Palestine. Traditionally, the party has been a strong supporter of Palestinian rights, drawing a connection between their experience of colonialism and the Irish experience. However, as it seeks to align more directly with the EU, it has quietly shifted its position. This became very clear in response to a government resolution in the Dáil. The Government's motion asserted "Israel's right to defend itself", but there was no such assertion of the Palestinian right to resist occupation and attack. The motion had the usual Western world's weasel words of sympathy for Palestinians, but included nothing that would rein in Israel's violence. The motion said Israel's actions "must be in line with international law" even though this was debated the day after Israel had murdered 500 Palestinians in Gaza after bombing a hospital.

Sinn Féin proposed three amendments to the Government motion, but these were all defeated. It then voted for the Government motion. By way of contrast, People Before Profit proposed a counter

motion to the Government, that included an assertion of the right of Palestinians to resist occupation and had calls for the expulsion of the Israeli Ambassador. It also called for the dismantling of Israeli apartheid. But shamefully, Sinn Féin did not support the People Before Profit motion and it fell.

These shifts have undermined the party's credibility among left wing activists, but its leadership think that this is a price worth paying. They calculate that only a small minority of the most politicised activists are concerned. Broadly, they assume that if they increase their general rhetoric on Palestine, the details of supporting a resolution which proclaims Israel's right to defence will go under the radar. They also assume that the electoral support for Sinn Féin comes mainly from a working class that is concerned with domestic issues.

This compartmentalisation can break down, however. For one thing, a large section of workers does follow party responses to big global issues such as war or climate change. Moreover, once a party embraces a strategy of moderation the drawbridge that protects it from media pressure is undermined.

Sometimes this dynamic emerges suddenly around small but symbolic issues. Thus, when the party housing

spokesperson, Eoin Ó Broin re-tweeted an image of the modern-day Gardaí assisting an eviction, the right wing press went wild. How dare he impugn the good name of a police force who, it was claimed, could never act like the Royal Irish Constabulary. Ó Broin quickly caved in and telephoned the general secretary of the Association of Garda Inspectors and Sergeants to say that 'I stressed it was not my intention to offend, criticise or drag An Garda Síochána into a political controversy.'<sup>31</sup> Ó Broin also attacked the right wing economists who effectively run the Department of Finance. These periodically advise against any major increase in public spending. In one of his sharper remarks Ó Broin said,

I think John [McCarthy] should be sacked... You have a guy who knows nothing about housing, nothing at all. He is a very, very orthodox, I would argue, almost evangelical economist in terms of his way of seeing things. He was the kind of economist that advised government to do the kinds of things that they did before the crash".<sup>32</sup>

Once again there was a predictable howl of outrage from the political establishment and the right wing press. How dare he question the neutrality and integrity of the senior civil servants who

steer the Department of Finance? Once again, Ó Broin backed down, effectively swallowing what he described as ‘his own ill-judged comment’. As the party comes nearer to government and embraces the possibility of coalition with Fianna Fáil, these types of climb down will grow.

### **The Radical Left and Sinn Féin**

There is an unspoken paradox at the heart of the relationship between the radical left and Sinn Féin. The majority of the latter’s voters transfer left because they see progressive parties as closer to their own aspirations. According to one calculation, 33 percent of Sinn Féin transfers went to the radical left, including People Before Profit, Solidarity, and Independents for Change. In Dublin, it was even more pronounced, with 48 percent transferring to the radical left.<sup>33</sup> Yet the radical left presents genuine criticism of Sinn Féin and has been more in tune with upsurges from below such as during the water charges. It is in Sinn Féin’s interest to capture as many radical left votes as possible before entering government to insulate itself from criticism. It will do this by claiming to offer the best chance of ending the domination of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. ‘Why waste a vote on the left when Sinn

Féin will deliver the change’ will be its argument.

Against this discourse, the radical left needs to defend itself. It can point to Sinn Féin’s march to the centre and ask the simple question: if it moves so fast before an election, what will happen when it is surrounded by the unelected Irish state, and its EU allies, after one? Far from being a wasted vote, every No 1 vote for People Before Profit or other left formations is a signal to the Sinn Féin leadership that they must halt their drift to the establishment. By making it clear that it will have no truck with Fianna Fáil, the radical left shows there is a real divide in Irish politics. Its very presence in the Dáil ensures that politics is not some conventional game whereby all parties are potential coalition partners with each other. It indicates there is a basic incompatibility between parties that want to break from the neoliberal tax haven model and those in the political establishment.

The radical left needs to present its own positive vision of what a left government can do. This is outlined clearly in the People Before Profit pamphlet, *The Case for a Left Government*. It argues that a left government would use public land for public housing and would form a state construction company to increase supply. It would impose rent controls and

a cap on mortgage payments. It would raise the minimum wage to €15 an hour. It would ban US troops from Shannon and withdraw from PESCO. It would move quickly to separate church and state ending religious control of our schools. This positive left agenda offers a real connection to the aspirations of many workers.

The radical left fights on the electoral terrain but does not confine its activities to this sphere. The key to any substantial left advance lies in the mobilisation of large numbers of workers in their own interests. So far, social partnership has represented a huge block on this type of activity but there are limits to it. Last year, for example, the best organised workers were forced to take pay cuts, and many will now seek to restore their living standards. This will put pressure on union leaders who cannot forever remain content with a declining membership. Advocating more pay cuts can only accelerate the decline of the wider movement and many union activists will no longer stomach this.

However, even if there is not mass mobilisation of organised workers, the key to the advance of the radical left lies in people power movements which can arise from a variety of issues. Neoliberal Ireland has left thousands of people bereft of basic services. Tenants face

evictions: disability campaigners demand basic services; on top of it all, there is a massive housing crisis. In every area, the ruthless pursuit of profit tramples over people's needs. Conventional politicians claim they can fix all this without changing the structure of society. In reality, it takes mass mobilisations to wrest the simplest reform out of the Irish establishment. The more we engage in this type of pressure today, the more any new government will be forced to respond to a risen people.

In making all these arguments, the radical left does not see Sinn Féin as its enemy. Quite the contrary, we often fight alongside and urge them to join united fronts. Our criticism of the party's trajectory is of an entirely different order to our attacks on the current political elite. While we sometimes stand shoulder to shoulder with Sinn Féin, we never encourage any sort of unity with our real enemies – FF and FG. Our criticisms of their current direction are made from the vantage point of solidarity with the aspirations of their grassroots members and supporters. Some of these will agree with us – but still stick with Sinn Féin. Others will look for more radical left alternatives. The job of the radical left is to patiently explain and win as many as possible to its cause.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Mary Lou McDonald. Address to the American Chamber of Commerce @ <https://www.amchambusinessreport.com/stakeholders/mary-lou-mcdonald>.

<sup>2</sup> Pearse Doherty Interview: ‘Big business and investors know Sinn Féin won’t go after them’ *Irish Independent* 10 October 2021.

<sup>3</sup>Red C Poll March 2022. See <https://redcresearch.ie/the-social-divide-in-irish-politics-march-2022-opinion-poll/>.

<sup>4</sup> PwC Advises Clients to sell Assets before Sinn Féin comes to power’ *Irish Times* 9 April 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Sinn Féin would tax people fairly and spend wisely, if elected, says Pearse Doherty. *Sunday Business Post* 22 September 2023.

<sup>6</sup> This is the title of a 110 page manifesto that can be found @ [https://www.sinnfein.ie/files/2020/Giving\\_Workers\\_and\\_Families\\_a\\_Break\\_-\\_A\\_Manifesto\\_for\\_Change.pdf](https://www.sinnfein.ie/files/2020/Giving_Workers_and_Families_a_Break_-_A_Manifesto_for_Change.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> *Éire Nua* can be found @ <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/sf/sinnfein79.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Ed Moloney. 2007. *A Secret History of the IRA*. London. Penguin. p.187.

<sup>9</sup>Gerry Adams. 1986. *The Politics of Irish Freedom*. Mount Eagle Publications. p.91.

<sup>10</sup> For a refutation of this argument see Kieran Allen. 1990. *Is Southern Ireland a Neocolony?* Dublin. Bookmarks <http://www.marxists.de/ireland/neocolony/index.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://vote.sinnfein.ie/new-fiscal-rules-must-promote-investment-and-respect-sovereignty-of-member-states-pearse-doherty-td/> for more details.

<sup>12</sup> S&P see ‘business friendly’ economy if Sinn Féin come to power’ *Irish Times* 22 January 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Corporation tax should rise to 17 percent - Sinn Féin. *Irish Times*. 13 January 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Sinn Féin, *Recession and Recovery: There is a better way*, 2011. p.2.

<sup>16</sup> Sinn Féin Submission to the Public Consultation of the Commission on Taxation & Welfare.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Giving Workers and Their Families a Break’. Sinn Féin Manifesto 2020 p.105. @ [https://www.sinnfein.ie/files/2020/Giving\\_Workers\\_and\\_Families\\_a\\_Break\\_-\\_A\\_Manifesto\\_for\\_Change.pdf](https://www.sinnfein.ie/files/2020/Giving_Workers_and_Families_a_Break_-_A_Manifesto_for_Change.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> ‘Support for historic Sinn Féin /Fianna Fáil Coalition grows’. *Irish Independent* 23 September 2023.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil edge towards a deal’ *Irish News* 8 August 2023.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Fianna Fáil needs to ask itself an uncomfortable question: can it do business with Sinn Féin?’ *Journal.ie* 13 September 2023.

<sup>21</sup> FF TDs would not exclude Sinn Féin after the next election. *Irish Times* 8 February 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Sinn Féin will talk to all parties about forming a government. *Irish Times* 2 February 2020. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/sinn-fein-will-talk-to-all-parties-on-forming-a-government-1.4159240>

<sup>23</sup> Coalition Kaleidoscope. Sinn Féin’s route to government hinges on who will share power. *Sunday Business Post* 5 August 2023.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Government must scrap water charges – Adams’ *Irish Times* November 4, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Social Partnership-Is a different model possible’ *An Phoblacht* 24 November 2005.

<sup>26</sup> *Protecting the Rights of Workers*, Sinn Féin Policy Document pp. 9, 10.

<sup>27</sup> See [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_50349.htm#:~:text=The percent20PfP percent20was percent20established percent20in, every percent20field percent20of percent20NATO percent20activity for more details](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50349.htm#:~:text=The percent20PfP percent20was percent20established percent20in, every percent20field percent20of percent20NATO percent20activity for more details).

<sup>28</sup> ‘Giving Workers and their Families a Break’, *Sinn Féin Manifesto* 2020 p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Sinn Féin drops pledges to withdraw from EU and NATO defence arrangements’ *Irish Times* 13 May 2023.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Sinn Féin has come a very long way in its attitude to the EU’ *Irish Times* 8 December 2022.

<sup>31</sup> ‘I didn’t mean to offend gardaí with famine eviction picture, Eoin Ó Broin tells AGSI chief in phone clarification. *Irish Independent* 3 April 2023.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Sinn Féin’s Eoin Ó Broin in U-turn over ‘sack’ civil servant remark’. *Irish Independent* 30 October 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Analysis from Jim O’Leary @ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/those-sinn-fein-surpluses-what-reveal-jim-o-leary>.