

THE CASE FOR A LEFT GOVERNMENT

*Getting Rid of Fianna
Fáil and Fine Gael*



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THE LEGACY OF FIANNA FÁIL AND FINE GAEL

There is something unusual about Ireland. For one hundred years, Dáil Éireann has been run by two parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, who have identical policies. So similar that they now belong to the one coalition and swap turns being Taoiseach.

They began as enemies during a civil war when Cumman Na nGaedheal took guns from the British and crushed their republican opponents, some of whom went on to form Fianna Fáil. But the differences have melted away. Today both parties serve a privileged elite.

Consider only the housing crisis. Thousands of young people want to emigrate because they cannot get their own home. Many are forced to live at home with their parents. Or else they must pay huge rents to private landlords. If they put their name down for social housing, they will wait for an average of 12 years in Dublin.

This is a direct result of political decisions. Wealthy people have always looked on property as a safe investment, an easy way to make money. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael FULLY support this attitude. Many of their TDs and Senators are landlords, often owning multiple properties like Simon Coveney TD. One-fifth of Oireachtas members are landlords even though these only represent 3% of the population. No wonder the Irish political system refuses to see housing as a social right.

The policies of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are responsible for the housing crisis. They stopped building social housing and instead hand over €1 billion each year to private landlords. That is a quarter of the annual housing budget. They refuse to impose proper rent controls on landlords. They allow banks to charge higher interest rates than the rest of Europe and do nothing to create affordable homes. Today, for example, speculators are holding on to 80,000 sites because they are waiting for house prices to rise.

The housing crisis shows the social dangers of the right-wing policies of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. They are true believers in the economic dogma that 'we must leave it to the market'. They are ideologically opposed to state intervention to protect people from the ravages of capitalism.

You can see this in almost every aspect of Irish life.

Irish hospital waiting lists, for example, are the worst in Europe. If you have money, you can get quick treatment in private hospitals but if you are on a medical card, you will wait years for major operations. Many take out private health insurance because they are afraid of relying on public hospitals. But they end up paying three times – with health insurance, hospital charges and in taxes. The childcare system is scandalous as many parents must pay over €1,000 a month for privatised childcare. In a poor country like Bulgaria, they pay just €18 a month.

Or look at the way this government pretends to tackle the climate and biodiversity crisis. There is plenty of rhetoric, but the harsh fact is that we rank in the bottom half of countries for tackling climate change. Ireland has also been ranked 13th from the bottom out of 240 countries in biodiversity intactness.

At the core of all these policies is an economic model, known as neoliberalism, and a development model which we call tax haven capitalism.

Neoliberalism is an economic doctrine that was popularised by Milton Friedman. It suggests that state spending should be shrunk and basic services be provided by the private sector. ‘User fees’ or charges are required to make this work because otherwise there would be no profit for the private sector. The public sector is seen as inherently inefficient and competition between private companies is the best way to organise services. These dogmas were promoted through international agencies like the IMF, the World Bank and the OECD. The Irish political elite took them as received wisdom and implemented them with great gusto.

They constantly try to make us pay for basic services rather than provide them free through general taxation. Back in 2014, they tried to make us pay for water until they were defeated by a mass protest movement. But we still pay private companies to collect our waste. Many of us must pay a GP for a visit. You even have to pay €500 to call out the fire service.

The insanity of this approach is best shown in the electricity sector. Up to the mid-nineties, Ireland had the cheapest electricity in Europe for domestic users. Then Fianna Fáil ‘liberalised’ the market (broke up a state company and brought in private companies) and gave the ESB a ‘for profit mandate’. Today we have one of the dearest electricity prices because it has been ‘re-balanced’ to cut costs for big corporations. Even with inflation running out of control, FF and FG oppose price controls and will not dream of re-nationalisation.

The leaders of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are not just intellectually convinced of neoliberalism, it fits in well with their model of how to develop the 26-county state as a tax haven. Their policy is to offer low taxes to multinationals so that they will 'create jobs' and raise living standards. Even children know that the country offers a 12.5% rate of tax to global corporations. Politicians keep repeating the mantra 'we are open for business', meaning that they guarantee low taxes and low regulation.

Turning the country into a tax haven has profound consequences for Irish society. There are so many tax breaks given to the rich that it is sometimes hard to keep up with them. So a foreign executive can get a tax break for sending their children to a private school, under the Special Assignee Relief Programme. An Irish millionaire who claims to live outside the country for 183 days a year is treated as a tax exile and pays hardly any tax. A vulture fund that buys up Irish property can use a Section 110 clause to get away with paying minimal rates of taxes. Thus, Goldman Sachs who bought €200 million of property loans paid no tax on the cash repayments. Another 'loophole' uses allowances for internal company loans, interest payments and the cost of 'buying' a brand to reduce taxable profits. These mechanisms, for example, allowed Starbucks to pay just €45 in taxes in 2016.

The political elite excuses these scandals by claiming that clever accountants outwitted the tax authorities but, in reality, the political elite work hand in glove with clever accountants to create the very loopholes that reduce taxes. The revelation, for example, that Apple paid an annual tax rate of less than 2% in its entire existence in Ireland is shocking enough but the real scandal is that they are not the only multinational to benefit from such rates. They are the rule rather than the exception.

Organised tax dodging sets up a 'frictionless' relationship between the political and economic elite. They mix and mingle in the same circles; corporate executives can pick up the phone any time to government ministers or lobby for favours. The close relationship between the Irish state and the leaders of corporate finance was exemplified by the Irish Financial Services Clearing House Group which operated within the Department of the Taoiseach. This was an embedded lobby group composed of executives from the bigger banks and finance houses, located inside a key government department. When a scandal broke over its influence, it was simply renamed as the Industry Advisory Group, but the corporate leaders still maintained their influence.

Thus, without any discussion with the wider Irish public, the Irish state has become the key opponent of any moves to impose an EU-wide digital tax or even the ultra-modest Tobin tax on currency speculation. Informal relationships are also evident in the way the American Chamber of Commerce influences politicians or the way the Industrial Development Authority functions as a voice for multinationals inside the state machinery.

LOSING THEIR GRIP

Ireland's two main right-wing parties are in decline – and they are frightened. In 2007, just before the Celtic Tiger crashed, they received 70% of the popular vote and Labour got 10%. This was the highpoint of Ireland's 'two and a half party' system, so-called because Labour traditionally propped up one of the other in a coalition.

Today opinion polls suggest that these three parties get just about 40% of the vote. Their support base has halved.

The Italian socialist, Antonio Gramsci, once claimed that ruling parties need to create a 'national popular bloc' to give voice to the concerns of a majority in civil society. In more simple terms, they need to be in tune with people's aspirations. If this is true, then Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's song is well out of tune.

Church Control:

The 26-county state could once draw on a strong wellspring of conservatism. The Bishops moved in lockstep with Fianna Fáil and the party had deep roots in sections of the GAA, primary school teachers and, strangely, groupings like Dublin taxi drivers. For many decades the country was run by two men, Eamonn de Valera and Archbishop John Charles McQuaid. They gave us Magdalene Laundries, bans on contraception and divorce and a virulent anti-communism.

Today it all appears different. The political elite pride themselves on their liberalism. They boast that they give out free contraceptives and that gay people can come out openly. But their liberalism is skin deep.

All the major reforms in Irish society were forced through from below. It was only when tens of thousands marched for marriage equality and Repeal that the political elite did an about-turn. Before the big marches, Leo Varadkar opposed marriage equality and the Dáil voted down a bill from Clare Daly to call a referendum for Repeal. But the sight of 20,000 plus young people on the streets forced through the change.

But while reforms have been won, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have no intention of uprooting the Catholic Church from control over the hospitals and schools. 96% of our primary schools are still controlled by the Catholic Church. The local Bishop appoints the majority of management boards and these vet teachers for their religious views. In secondary schools, young people are forced to take religion classes and sex education is outsourced to Catholic agencies who do not accept gay sexuality or non-binary identities.

One shocking result of this deference to the Bishops is that Irish tax payers have ended up paying €1.5 billion in redress to the victims of clerical sexual abuse.

Despite a major shift in public attitudes, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil rely on a rural support base that values the role of the Catholic Church. They refuse to challenge these attitudes by, for example, ensuring that in every area of the country there are doctors willing to perform terminations. Instead, every advance for women's or LGBT rights had to be torn from them.

Despite the current distance between the Bishops and the political elite, they share one thing in common. Both support the denial of people's social rights to housing, health and free education. Catholic doctrine stresses the principle of subsidiarity - that responsibility for the provision of services must fall on families or voluntary agencies. This dovetails neatly with the neoliberal philosophy of the right-wing parties. And so, we have a state that organizes services for older people or the disabled through voluntary agencies that are actually funded by the state. It is a way of denying people basic social rights.

No wonder many young people have no time for the in-built conservatism of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

Partition:

You can tell the political elite are out of step with their own people when they repeatedly call for 're-education' and 'apologies'. When the Fine Gael Justice Minister, Charlie Flanagan, announced a commemoration for all those who died in the War of Independence, including the Black and Tans, he was met with a torrent of outrage. The song 'Come out yet Black and Tans' shot up the charts. The same happened when po-faced politicians and RTE harried the women's soccer team to make apologies for singing 'Up the Ra'.

Behind these incidents lie more fundamental changes. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, whether intentionally or not, set out to create a distinct 26-county identity that ignored events in the North. Despite being verbally opposed to partition, they became its defenders. If Ireland was united, they know that their own grip on political power would be weakened. Instinctively, they recognised the truth behind James Connolly's prediction that partition would create a 'carnival of reaction'. Except, they celebrated that outcome.

For decades they constructed a 'Catholic State for a Catholic people' that was a mirror image of its counterpart in the North. They built up a strong repressive apparatus to deal with 'subversion'. And during the troubles, they were able to use Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act to ban republican voices from the airwaves and wage an ideological war against them.

Yet this has all changed for many young people. They are not hidebound by any respect for 26-county conservatism. They show no deference or subservience to Britain, treating it like any other state that they visit or work in for periods. And they think of change on an all-island basis. This is why, for example, after Repeal, the cry went up 'the North will be next'. Or after a horrific Belfast rape trial, hundreds gathered spontaneously in Dublin to show solidarity.

Many now want an end to partition and see a border poll as a basic democratic right. The Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael political elite, however, fear such a prospect. This is why they keep repeating the same lines that a border poll would be 'premature'. They are completely out of tune with the aspirations of a majority of people in the South.

Neutrality:

Irish neutrality came about because of an historic experience of colonization. During WW2, Winston Churchill demanded that Irish ports be handed over to the Allied war effort. Even though, Ireland had a conservative government this request was refused because the country wanted no involvement with its former colonial master. Despite much vaunted claims to defend democracy, Britain still controlled the vast sub-continent of India.

Since then, Irish neutrality has emerged as a political understanding that the country should not be involved in imperialist war games. It is a position that is regularly supported by over 70% of the population in opinion polls.

However, Fine Gael have always hated the idea of neutrality and, more recently, they have been joined by Fianna Fáil. The result is a government strategy of eroding neutrality by stealth.

Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Irish governments have allowed the US military to use Shannon airport for transit flights, including transporting prisoners to torture sites. Currently, over 65,000 US troops pass through the airport each year. In 2017, Fine Gael pushed through Ireland's membership of the Permanent Structured Co-operation on Security and Defence (PESCO). This committed the country to increase its defence spending five-fold and to align its military equipment with NATO.

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are now using the war in Ukraine to kill off neutrality and are aiming to bring the country into NATO. The majority of people rightly oppose Putin's invasion of Ukraine – just as they also oppose Israel's long occupation of Palestine or Saudi Arabia's incursions into Yemen. But opposing invasion is one thing – joining in a proxy war, launched by a rival imperialist power is quite another.

The Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael-Green government has admitted to participating in five meetings of the Ukraine Contact Defence Group. Irish representatives have attended meetings of this body at the Ramstein US Airbase in Germany, which is the home of the NATO airpower headquarters. This group has been described as a "NATO alliance" by the US Secretary of Defence. The government has also agreed for Irish soldiers to participate in an EU military exercise training the Ukrainian army.

Their aim is to eventually move to a referendum to finally bury neutrality. However, the majority of the population want the positive approach to neutrality that Sabina Higgins called for. Despite being lambasted by a D4 press, many agreed that Ireland should be using its position in the UN Security Council to call for peace talks.

There is a huge gap between the Fianna Fáil/Fine Gael's desire to sign up as full members of a Western imperialist alliance and the aspirations of the population for peace and freedom. They know that it will not be the sons and daughters of the upper class who will be sent to join and fight for an EU or NATO army. It will be working-class youth who sacrifice their lives for the hypocritical rhetoric of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.



The Case for a Left Government

Real change means booting Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael out of office. We need a left government that promotes the interests of working people as enthusiastically as they looked after the privileged.

There should also be a break from an informal understanding in Dáil Éireann that any party could coalesce with another provided 'the numbers are right'. The assumption is that there can be a compromise on policies which are diametrically opposed to each other. It leads to a degrading of democratic choice. Voters may think they have voted for, let's say left environmental policies, but they actually get a government that has a different agenda. The case of the Green Party should be a warning to all.

But what if there was a minority right-wing party in a new government? This is by no means impossible as Fianna Fáil has quietly shifted its position. Whereas previously it was committing to a coalition with Fine Gael over the longer term, it now claims that 'it is not ruling it out' coalition with Sinn Féin. Strangely, Sinn Féin has not ruled out that possibility either. In 2018, for example, Mary Lou McDonald even said she wanted to form a coalition with either Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael.

However, if Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael are in the next government, even as minority parties, they will block actions we need to stand up to corporate landlords, tackle the big polluters and end the rule of big business. They will use their positions to undermine any move to substantially increase the minimum rate of pay or end church control of education. These right-wing parties represent the interests of the rich and privileged and so would only join a Sinn Féin led coalition to 'house train' the party into the practices of the Irish political establishment.

Unfortunately, recent experience in the North illustrates this. Sinn Féin has been in coalition with the DUP from 2007 to 2020. During that time, they implemented austerity policies and supported measures to reduce corporation taxes on the wealthy. Both the DUP and Sinn Féin blocked any advance on women's rights, forcing thousands of women to travel to Britain for abortions. There can be little doubt that the presence of Fianna Fáil in a coalition with Sinn Féin would produce a similar conservative result.

We, therefore, need a real left-wing government that is willing to uproot the privileges the wealthy have enjoyed. Here are the type of policies that a left government could adopt.

Housing:

It could take decisive measures to solve the housing crisis by ending reliance on the private sector. It could ensure that public land is used only for social and affordable housing by stopping its sell-off to speculators. It could create a national construction company tasked with clearing the housing list within five years by building 150,000 council and genuinely affordable homes.

Once the profit motive is removed and public land is used, the cost of these homes would drop significantly. In 2020, the Institute of Chartered Surveyors estimated that the construction or 'hard costs' of building a 3-bed semi in the greater Dublin area came to €179,000. Even allowing for inflation, it is clear that a publicly owned not-for-profit company could build houses much cheaper than the private sector.

It could end the rip-off of renters by bringing in real controls that allowed for rent reductions. It could give renters security of tenure by banning no-fault evictions.

It could increase people's chances of owning their own home by banning vulture funds from the housing market. It could impose a 'use it or lose it' tax on the 150,000 vacant homes and land where planning permission has been granted. In Dublin, just 19% of the homes that received planning permission were actually under construction in October 2022. Speculators are accumulating vast land banks and waiting for prices to shoot up.

A left government could also order banks to stop charging Irish mortgage holders a premium rate, above the ECB interest rate, on tracker mortgages. It is estimated that this can amount to a €70,000 additional charge on an average house over the course of a mortgage term. If banks refuse to comply, a government can impose a windfall tax or simply nationalise them.

It would make housing and accommodation available for those seeking refuge from domestic violence and triple funding to provide safe refuges in every country of Ireland.

Quality Public Services:

A left government could establish a National Health Service that treats people according to their medical need and not the size of their wallets. To do so, it would take private hospitals into public ownership and integrate them into the health service. It would increase investment in preventative health, ensuring regular checkups to reduce hospital admissions. It would create a proper mental health service and ensure that people are not just treated with pills.

It could dramatically cut the cost of childcare which is currently the dearest and the most privatised in Europe by establishing a National Childcare Service that is free at the point of access. This would mean integrating the current private for-profit services into a new public system. Such a measure would lessen the structural discrimination that parents and women currently experience.

To pay for these major changes, we would need to end Ireland's corporate tax haven status. The tax loopholes for gigantic corporations like Google and Apple would have to be closed. The big corporations would have to pay the same level of tax on their profits as low-paid workers do on their wages. In other words, a 20% rate. There should also be a millionaires tax on net assets over €1 million and an end to tax privileges for the wealthy such as the tax exile rule or the Special Assignee Relief Programme.

Workers Rights:

A left government would unashamedly stand up for workers. It would increase the minimum wage to €15 an hour to provide a living wage for the lowest paid, including women and migrants, and to raise the wages for all. It would introduce legislation to guarantee workers the right to collective bargaining by a union of their choice. It would repeal the Industrial Relations Act which restricts workers' ability to take effective strike action.

It would end the gender pay gap, increase pay rates for essential workers in childcare, care work, nursing and level up pay for part-time workers. It would increase statutory sick pay to 100% of wages and ensure all workers are covered when they are sick.

It would challenge the discourse about a pension 'time bomb' and restore the retirement age to 65. It would insist that as the productivity of workers has dramatically increased, so too should retirement at 65 be a voluntary choice for workers. It would end the rip-off of the private pension providers and establish a proper scheme to invest workers' savings in beneficial enterprises that guarantee adequate pensions to those who contribute.

Separate Church and State:

In 1905, France introduced a separation of church and state by decree. More than a hundred years later, a left government would do the same in Ireland. Such a measure would bring church-controlled schools and hospitals into public ownership and democratic accountability. The practice of using schools to promote particular religious beliefs would end. Instead, full freedom to practice religion as a voluntary, private right would be respected by the state. This would enable comprehensive non-directive sex education in schools.

A left government would also hold a constitutional convention to draw up a new secular constitution for a 32-county Ireland which recognises full gender equality and excludes any references to religious thinking. With this, it would campaign for a border poll to end partition.

A Foreign policy based on Solidarity:

A left government would end the current practice of Kowtowing to US imperialism and adopt a policy based on defending Irish neutrality. It would understand neutrality as not simply an abstention from military alliance but a positive policy to promote peace and oppose all imperialist interventions. In practice, this would mean ending the use of Shannon airport by the US military. Irish troops would be withdrawn from all imperialist ventures, such as the French-led intervention in Mali. There would be a consistent policy of full support for Palestinian liberation. There would be a similar opposition to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and a rejection of all attempts to turn the conflict into a proxy war between American power and a Russian-Chinese competitive axis. In line with this policy, a left government would oppose all steps to create a European army.

Transition to a Fossil-Free Economy:

A left government would not rely on the market to tackle climate change as the Green Party has tried. It would transition to free, green public transport immediately to get people out of cars and reduce the number dying from air pollution. It would use a state construction company to implement a programme to mass retrofit the current housing stock which has poor energy ratings. This would both cut costs for householders and reduce emissions. A left government would seek to reduce the overall number of cattle by first targeting the big farmers and ensuring a just transition for smaller farmers. It would set a target of moving to a zero carbon and ecologically sustainable economy by 2030, with at least 10% reduction in carbon emissions each year.

Ending Partition:

Historically the Southern state functioned as a mirror image of the Northern state. Two conservative regimes basked in what James Connolly called a 'carnival of reaction'. This assisted loyalist forces align the identity of Protestant workers with the monarchy and Tory symbols. By taking decisive measures to end church control of schools and hospitals, a left government would present a different vision of Ireland. If, in addition, it was clearly taking measures which benefited all workers, there could be no talk of 'the boot being on the other foot'. The prospect of a united Ireland that was not just about bolting the six counties onto the current twenty-six would become more real. Such a left government would declare openly that it wanted a constituent assembly to found a Socialist United Ireland.

Anti-Racism:

Against the growing threat of far-right and fascist forces, a left government would oppose all forms of racism and discrimination. It would end the direct provision system and ensure there is adequate housing for both asylum seekers and Irish citizens. It would allow asylum seekers to work and end discrimination in access to social welfare payments. It would end any distinction between asylum seekers based on religion, gender identity or skin colour.

An Economy for People not Profit:

When anyone talks about 'the economy' today, many feel this is the preserve of expert economists who guide us through its mysterious workings. But strangely, while professional economists often call for wage restraint they never call for curbs on profit. This is because our current arrangements are dependent on anonymous investors whose only ambition is increased profits.

A left government would aim to change this by taking measures that put the needs of people first. It would nationalise the banking sector to gain more levers to use credit for socially useful purposes such as house building or an ecological just transition. It would carry out an audit of public debt with the aim of repudiating debt resulting from the banking crisis of 2008. It would remove the profit mandate of the ESB and use it to re-integrate the energy sector around publicly owned industry. Instead of forcing workers to accept low wage increases in an era of inflation, it would target the profiteering of big companies by either imposing windfall taxes or nationalising them.

This is clearly a radical programme – but that is precisely what we need in a crisis-ridden world. The question is though, is such a programme possible to implement and how exactly could it be carried out?

Can a Left Government Succeed?

People are tired of parties making promises before an election and doing the opposite when they come to power. Even if these parties were sincere – and most are not – aspirations alone are not sufficient. A strategy to succeed is necessary and entails understanding why other left governments have failed. In January 2015, Syriza came to power in Greece after an economic crash devastated the country. This was the first radical left government in Europe since the Popular Front governments in Spain and France in 1936. It promised to take more radical measures than any conventional Labour or Socialist Party had done before.

Across Europe, the rich were terrified of the Greek example and set out to sabotage the government. The European Central Bank refused to accept Greek government bonds and government-guaranteed debt as collateral. Simultaneously, the Troika composed of the European Commission, the IMF and the ECB itself offered to bail out Greece if Syriza reversed its policies and carried out austerity.

The Syriza government responded by calling a snap referendum. In the most difficult of circumstances where banks ran out of cash, 61% of the population voted to reject the Troika's demands. But in a staggering about-turn, Syriza and its leader Alexis Tsipras refused to implement the referendum result and instead accepted the Troika's terms. It signed up to austerity and privatisation which was worse than before. It was a betrayal on a monumental scale.

A similar dynamic is at work in Spain. Here a radical left party, Podemos, was founded in 2014 to give voice to a mass movement in which three million people joined demonstrations and sit-downs in the squares. But in 2020, it joined with the equivalent of the Labour Party in coalition and has few gains to show for it. Instead of a complete overhaul of anti-worker legislation, it entered a social partnership arrangement with employers to bring in minor reforms in return for EU funding. It has stayed in government while 37 migrants were massacred in Melilla due to collaboration between Moroccan and Spanish authorities. It has not even introduced a wealth tax. The result has been a disillusionment that has benefited the right wing.

All of which raise an obvious question: what is to stop an Irish left government from taking the same path? To answer that we need to look at the causes of left failures.

One key reason is their belief that there can be no alternative to capitalism and the best that can be achieved is to manage it in a progressive fashion. This type of fatalism arises from an acceptance of the separation between politics and economics. Economics is supposed to be always answerable to 'markets' and so it is impossible to go against them. Politics, however, is seen as a realm of choice and it is assumed that the state has enough freedom to impose policies on the wider society. This discrepancy, however, is false.

The state does not just exist in a capitalist society – it is a capitalist state. By this, we mean that it is embedded in a structure of power that facilitates the domination of capital and money. Winning control of a government does not mean that one is in full control of the wider state machinery. And it certainly does not mean you are free from the economic blackmail that capital is able to deploy.

To be more specific: any government is surrounded by an institutional apparatus that has been honed in the service of capitalist domination. There is a permanent civil service whose upper echelons are recruited from higher professionals who have been trained in the logic of support for profit making. There is a legal system that puts the demands of private property over the needs of people. So, any substantial reform will face a legal challenge that will go to the courts. But the judges who will hear these cases are far from neutral or independent as they try to claim. A former Labour Party TD, Anne Ferris, got it exactly right when she claimed that 'As it stands now, judicial nominees generally come from such a varied background as that of the wealthy, middle-aged white man schooled in Clongowes, all the way to the wealthy, middle-aged white man schooled in Blackrock'.

The Irish state is in turn embedded in the EU institutions which are not subject to scrutiny by the public. Even if one is elected to the European Parliament, you cannot propose legislation but must work through informal, shadowy 'trilogues' which hammer out agreements between the different EU institutions. One result is that a neoliberal philosophy is soldered into the very articles of EU treaties. Thus, the Lisbon Treaty, for example, contains a stricture that the EU Commission must ensure that 'competition is not distorted'. This has led to 'directives' which have forced through the liberalisation of the energy sector or, indirectly, has led to the privatisation of Aer Lingus as government subsidies for the airline ran counter to EU legislation.

All of this begins to explain the fundamental mistake that parties like Syriza made. In rhetoric they used the symbolism of the left with red flags, addressing each other as 'comrade' and denouncing neoliberalism. But despite their words, they lacked any understanding of an agency that could rival the power of the EU and its capitalist backers. They did not think that working people - even when they voted decisively in a referendum - had the power or ability to challenge a privileged elite. As this was ruled out in advance, they sought to persuade EU leaders of the rightness of their economic case for moving away from austerity. They wanted to show that a Keynesian approach made sense - even from a capitalist standpoint.

The former Syriza Finance Minister, Yanis Varoufakis, described how he was met with 'blank stares' when he tried to persuade eurozone colleagues. "You might as well have sung the Swedish national anthem -- you'd have got the same reply. There was no engagement at all. It was not even annoyance, it was as if one had not spoken." Syriza did not want to face the fact that the rich will use every means at their disposal to protect privilege and destroy any serious left-wing opposition. When there is any challenge to their system, it is no longer a question of intellectual argument or logic, they set out to destroy their opponent.

This lesson is not confined to EU institutions. As long as the spheres of politics and economics are separated, power over investment decisions remains in boardrooms. Faced with any threat to their ability to make profit; they will use every economic lever for sabotage. Thus, Michael O Leary, the boss of Ryanair, is already warning that his company is ready to quit Ireland over Sinn Féin's 'economic illiteracy'. And that is only the start of the type of economic terrorism that will be mobilised to sabotage talk of real change.

An investment strike or threats to move money abroad is just one of the many weapons the rich will deploy. They will use their control over the media to turn a population against a left government. Even the prospect of a Sinn Féin led government has led to a barrage of propaganda from the Irish Independent, the Irish Times and RTE against the party. It will not even stop there. We know from other countries that as capitalism decays, the wealthy will use far-right and fascist gangs who use a spurious radical rhetoric to divert anger onto social scapegoats such as migrants, gay, or trans people. In the very final analysis, they will deploy the police and the army to move against elected left-wing governments, as they did in Chile when the first self-proclaimed Marxist President, Salvador Allende, was elected.

All of this might suggest that effort to establish a left-wing government is doomed in advance. Which is a conclusion some would like you to draw as it feeds into a prevalent attitude of fatalism and de-politicisation.

However, the failure of previous left-wing governments is that their only ambition was to give capitalism a more human face. They thought that the rich could be persuaded to grant reforms if it was shown to be in their interest. They failed to see or did not want to understand that capitalists do not play according to cricket rules. When their money is threatened, they will exert every effort to bring down their opponent.

To be successful, therefore, a left-wing government must build this demonstrable fact into its calculations. Its only strategy for success must be to find a countervailing power outside of itself that can challenge the power of money. This means looking beyond governmental institutions to mobilise the potential power of working people.



People Power and Eco-Socialism

The formation of a left-wing government does not resolve fundamental issues – it only heightens conflict. This elementary truth overturns conventional ways of thinking.

According to this view, a democratic election settles matters. Once the votes are counted everyone is supposed to accept the result. The losers valiantly congratulate the winners and they in turn agree to ‘rule on behalf of all the people’. There are formal ceremonies where this usually happens, Trump being an exception. But as we have seen, the economic blackmail also starts to ‘house train’ any leftist into the rules of the capitalist game.

Imagine for a moment, the reaction in the Shelbourne Hotel bar or the Portmarnock Golf Club to the news that a left-wing party or Sinn Féin will form the next government. A mood of fear mixed with horror would overtake the gathering. Will they still be able to make money from the property market? Can they still charge high rents? What is to happen to the numerous tax breaks that benefit financial speculation? Are the uppity lower class going to look for higher wages? Even without prior planning, the rich will begin to move their money to safer havens.

Now imagine the reaction in Darndale or Crumlin, working-class suburbs in Dublin. There is celebration and delight. A feeling that against all the snobs and ‘experts’, they have elected THEIR government and that real change is coming. Housing lists can be cleared; wages will be increased; the class-ridden health system is going to be reformed. To put it mildly, expectations have grown and the old mood of ‘sure what can you do’ has dissipated.

A left-wing government has heightened rather than diminished the conflict between the social classes. But how will left-wing parties respond?

It could decide to moderate its policies in order to diffuse opposition. But in a somewhat different context James Connolly pointed to the consequences of this approach:

‘You can only disarm their hostility by assuring them that in a free Ireland their privileges’ will not be interfered with. That is to say, you must guarantee that when Ireland is free of foreign domination, the green-coated Irish soldiers will guard the fraudulent gains of capitalist and landlord from ‘the thin hands of the poor’ just as remorselessly and just as effectually as the scarlet-coated emissaries of England do today. On no other basis will the classes unite with you. Do you expect the masses to fight for this ideal?’

Or it could decide to carry through on its policies by overcoming and defeating the resistance of the privileged. But here there is a dilemma.

The capitalist state which it governs is not fit for purpose for this task. The left may have a majority in parliament but the levers they can use to implement decisions are minimal. They have no control over the secretive world of finance. If they abide by the rules of private property, they cannot prevent capitalists like Michael O Leary making their staff redundant. The state officials who command the hierarchy of the civil service will be unsympathetic and will tell them what cannot be done. The police who have been trained to manage the poor will balk at any attempt to ‘coerce’ the wealthy.

All of which means one thing: a left-wing party cannot solely see itself as the agent that will deliver it from on high. It must put its energy into the mobilisation of people power. In fact, that should be its major purpose in occupying government office.

Of course, it can act decisively through legislation. It should immediately repeal the Industrial Relations Act which has a provision to ban political strikes. It should make a ruling that any company receiving a government contract must accept unions and pay its workers a minimum wage of €15 an hour. It should support any struggle of working people and pledge that the resources of the state will be placed at their disposal.

It would make a serious start at implementing an eco-socialist vision. It would, for example, immediately ban exploration for fossil fuels.

It can also take some measures to obstruct sabotage from the wealthy. It could expand and fully use the 6th Anti Money Laundering Directive from the EU to establish the beneficial ownership of all forms of capital investment. It could adopt the Nordic model of making tax returns public in order to track attempts at tax evasion. It could abolish ‘commercial secrecy’ which has been used to

hide state payments to private firms. It could insist that the accounts of major corporations are open to view. Where the wealthy start an investment strike or move money out of the country it could impose capital controls in order to safeguard society.

The aim should be to remove the secrecy and mystification that surrounds terms such as 'financial engineering'. Private decisions over the deployment of money can have real social consequences. The Irish population were forced to bail out banks that took reckless decisions and caused economic havoc. It illustrated how the spurious claims about 'prying eyes' watching the wealthy should be discarded. Everyday hundreds of poor people must disclose details of their lives to state officials to receive social welfare, a student grant or apply for a council house. The rich should be treated no differently.

But even while taking such measures, a left-wing government can be stuck at the pinnacle of an institutional apparatus that is not designed to facilitate scrutiny of the rich. It will be necessary to call 'people's assemblies' into existence to carry through change and to organise resistance to any obstruction.

A 'people's assembly' is a form of participative direct democracy that invites communities and workplace representatives to come together and deliberate on measures needed to bring about more social equality. Unlike the Dáil itself, which discusses legislation and then leaves it to the state apparatus to implement, it should see itself as a working body to carry through its decisions. Instead of calling on government or union leaders to take action, it should organise actions itself, sometimes on a local and at other times on a national basis. People's assemblies might come into existence on foot of a call by left-wing parties to support governmental change. Or they could emerge spontaneously from below in answer to social crisis.

In the longer term, people's assemblies could lay the basis for a radical new form of democracy where we do not have to wait every five years for an election but can re-call the representatives that do not carry through their mandate. This, clearly, would require a different constitution designed to advance the interests of working people.

Their key function, however, is the mobilisation of forms of popular power. For the past few decades, the world has been subjected to a myth, a strong belief that leads to an artificial despair. Namely that money and 'markets' have a power that cannot be resisted. Sometimes this myth is couched in the language of globalisation – that no reform can occur because capital can move elsewhere at will. At other times the myth rests on a belief that the population must obey the inevitable laws of the market as if they were part of nature itself.

Yet capital rests on human activity and, sometimes, passivity. The New York Times once claimed that the only global power that could resist a military industrial complex was 'people power'. They were correct. Against attempts by the wealthy to sabotage left-wing change, there are a host of measures that people can take. They can mobilise in huge numbers on the streets to face down media inspired opposition to raising the minimum wage. They can make it costly for corporations to move production abroad by occupying their workplaces and holding the machinery. Should corporations still proceed, they can re-configure production. Where a pharmaceutical company, for example, tried to relocate people can use their skills to re-configure it as a generic facility rather than a branded one.

In all of this our aim is to create a society where production is geared to the needs of people rather than profit. In so doing, we can also slow down or stop climate change and halt the loss of biodiversity. The best way to both protect the environment and build a society answerable to people's real needs, is to create a democratically planned economy where there is extensive public ownership and advanced forms of democracy that give people a real say in decision making. Despite the imagery that money is like a floating spirit, it depends on real people who sit at computers and monitor it. A left-wing government, and the people's assemblies, which support it should brook no distinction between white-collar and blue-collar employees. Both should seek to mobilise the power of finance workers to report and prevent sabotage by the wealthy.

By its very nature people power contains an international dynamic. When Irish people watch French workers stage general strikes or see how Sri Lankan workers occupy presidential palaces, they are inspired to think beyond passivity. Similarly, real people power in Ireland can inspire many others across the world to tackle the mysterious power of capital. Once we start doing it, we shall discover that behind the mystery there is a great weakness. Their power derives only from our passivity.



Can Sinn Féin form Ireland's first Left government?

There is a contradiction at the heart of Sinn Féin. It is popular because it represents a viable alternative to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael rule and talks repeatedly about workers. It describes, for example, how, 'We have had Governments for the wealthy, Governments for the privileged, Governments for the property developers, Governments for the banks. Sinn Féin believes that it's time that we had a government for the people.'

Yet the party does not want to frighten the rich. In an interview with the Irish Independent, Pearse Doherty, referring to big business, said 'They know that Sinn Féin isn't going to go after them'. The former Fine Gael Minister, Brian Hayes, who now heads up a banking industry lobby group, advised his colleagues 'People need to be relaxed about this. With Sinn Féin, it's all about what a programme for government says. Manifestos are one thing, but programmes for government are a different animal.'

There are two main grounds for Hayes's optimism. First, Sinn Féin is committed to keep Ireland's corporate tax rate as low as possible. It will scrap obscene measures like the Special Assignee Relief Programme which gives foreign executives incredible tax privileges. It will impose a tiny solidarity tax on high earners but as Pearse Doherty puts it, for example, 'if you are earning above €140,000, say you are earning €150,000, you'll pay €300 more in tax.' But while these changes are welcome, Sinn Féin's policy is to leave intact the main pillars of tax haven Ireland.

The second reason for Hayes' optimism is that Sinn Féin are leaving open the possibility of a coalition with the right. When asked, Pearse Doherty said 'Sinn Féin will have "grown-up conversations" after the next election. Asked if this was with all parties, he replied, 'Of course.'

At this stage, these statements look like straws in the wind and, despite Hayes sense of calm, the privileged elite hate and despise Sinn Féin. Their aim is to stop their forward momentum and ideally make room for yet another Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael alliance. At worst, they want to frighten as many people as possible to stop Sinn Féin forming a government with other left-wing parties. This explains why there is a continual onslaught on the party from the mainstream media.

Currently, Sinn Féin's response is to sit tight and avoid taking overly radical stances. It presents itself as a party of government in waiting and, while promising change, wants to reassure that it will not be too radical. In an important break with its own tradition, it has dropped opposition to the Special Criminal Court even though non-jury courts were used to lock up its own supporters. It has rightly condemned Putin's invasion of Ukraine but lined up with the rest of the political establishment in supporting sanctions. More significantly, the party has refused to support calls for nationalisation of the energy sector.

However, even while making these moves to the centre, the party sometimes tacks left. It plays an active role in the Cost of Living Coalition and has helped mobilise thousands of people on the streets. Its TDs have come out strongly in support of Irish neutrality with one TD, Sean Crowe, calling for the disbandment of NATO. In brief, the party is caught between the radicalism of its base and a desire to enter government with only minor adjustments to the current model of Irish capitalism.

As a nationalist party, Sinn Féin also tries to straddle different constituencies and different classes, avoiding taking clear stances that will alienate some of its support base. Thus, on climate crisis, Sinn Féin does not commit to substantial cuts in carbon emissions from agriculture or reductions in the national cattle herd. It supports a right to abortion only in cases of rape or fatal foetal abnormality. But, alongside the DUP, it has failed to legislate for access of women to abortion services in the North.

All of this means that while Sinn Féin can be a vehicle for working-class aspirations, the contradiction in its ranks means it will constantly try to moderate these. It will not promote people power from below and will urge waiting for governmental change. This, however, is a grave mistake for two reasons. The more working people remain passive, the more de-politicisation and right-wing cynicism grows. Moreover, if Sinn Féin is adopting a moderate left strategy now, the chances are that it will succumb to capitalist pressure when in government.

Ireland, therefore, needs a strong left-wing party that is able to both break from political sectarianism and remain committed to the overthrow of capitalism. This is what distinguishes People Before Profit from Sinn Féin. It is not merely a matter of the final aim – it runs through the whole methodology through which both parties operate. As a radical left party, People Before Profit takes clear and consistent positions which challenge the current order.

It is anti-imperialist not just because it is opposed to Britain's partition of Ireland but also because it opposes the wider carve-up of the globe into spheres of influence of the major powers: the USA, Russia and China. Following the older socialist motto, that the 'main enemy is at home', it opposes US imperialism and never lines up behind it. because it is a force of oppression and domination which has brought war and destruction from Iraq to Palestine, from Libya to Syria. It supports a United Ireland and calls for an immediate border poll. But the divisions between Catholic and Protestant will not be overcome by stitching the Northern state together with the Southern tax haven. People Before Profit campaigns for a radical socialist United Ireland where all workers make gains.

It puts workers' power at the centre of its strategy and opposes the legacy of social partnership which has weakened trade unionism. It wants to help create a fighting union movement that bases itself on workplace militancy rather than reliance on a removed and compromised trade union bureaucracy.

People Before Profit combats all forms of oppression. It welcomes refugees and does not tolerate racism in its ranks. It stands up against misogyny and sexism and sees them as an inevitable part of the capitalist system. It challenges fake mainstream liberalism and supports the rights of LGBT and trans people.

However, while openly arguing that Sinn Féin cannot be trusted to carry through a consistent left programme, People Before Profit recognises that many working people currently see it as a vehicle for their aspirations. This is why we commit in advance of an election to vote for Mary Lou McDonald as Taoiseach if she is willing to lead a government that does not include Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael. Such a development would represent a strategic advance for left-wing politics because it would both increase the confidence of workers and also put Sinn Féin to the test in the eyes of their supporters.

We go further and state openly that we want to participate in a left government that transforms people's lives for the better and represents real change from the old Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael status quo. Successful social struggles must rise to the level of politics and that means concretely driving the right-wing parties from office. We will participate fully in that project, but such a government must be willing to break the rules of capitalism and challenge the obstruction of the rich and encourage the struggles of workers against the for-profit system.

In the event of TDs being elected, we shall enter discussions with Sinn Féin to form a left government without the two right-wing parties. We know that many of their own base support this and Sinn Féin should come under pressure to keep their word. If the party refuses to adopt a programme that really challenges the rich by mobilising people power, we will support its election to government office but will push for left-wing advances by staying outside government and voting on an issue-by-issue basis.

In all of this, the fight to bring about a 32-county Ireland that puts the interests of all working people before profit begins now. This is why we should not wait or quieten our demands to get a left government. We should fight now to increase our wages to make up for inflation. We should mobilise to force through changes on rent control and solutions to the housing crisis and build strong movements as we did with Repeal. Against any assault from the current right-wing government, we should promote militant people power as we did when we defeated the water charges.

It is the only way to win – and to guarantee us a better future.

