

The State of the Irish Left: Half-Full and Half-Empty

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Pessoptimism is the best approach. During the recession years the Irish left moved from a position of near complete irrelevance into being a powerful force in Irish politics.¹ Huge victories were won on the economic and social front and electoral gains were made both locally and nationally. But now the highwater of these years of militancy is over, the question is how substantial these gains were and whether the left-wing parties simply occupied the comfortable subaltern place in Irish politics temporarily vacated by the collapse of the old centre-left.

The recession changed everything, at least for a while. It hit Ireland harder than almost any other European country. The economy, based around a housing bubble and financial speculation, collapsed. Unemployment rose and emigration soared. During these years, Ireland was governed by centre right governments that included

the *Greens* and the *Labour Party* as minor partners. They were in turn destroyed by the electorate after imposing brutal austerity policies. Yet the Irish electorate, unlike other European countries didn't turn to the far-right, but towards left and republican groups.²

Now the recession is over, unemployment is negligible and people are no longer emigrating. Yet, most austerity measures remain and Ireland's government remains committed to running down public services and to neoliberal governance. At the same time, Ireland (especially Dublin) is facing a devastating and unprecedented housing crisis. The question for Ireland's fractious left is whether it can respond to all this as well as combat the early stages of far-right mobilisation.

The siren song of electoralism

Grouping	2009	2014	2019
Centre Left (Labour, Greens, Social Democrats)	135	63	125
Sinn Fein	54	159	81
Trotskyist (People before Profit/Socialist Party)	9	28	11

Two sets of figures can be used to chart the state of the left. The first is seats won in local elections (c950 in total) in 2009 during the height of the recession, in 2014 during the high tide of militancy and protest, and 2019 when the status quo seems secure. On the right of the left, the *Labour Party* was decimated in 2014. Their traditional role has always been to act as the subaltern partner in right wing coalitions. This time around, they were punished for their enthusiastic participation in austerity government. While they haven't recovered, similar political groupings such as the small centrist Irish *Green Party* and the *Social Democrats* (a breakaway from *Labour* who can be fully expected to recombine with them when the numbers add up) have taken up the slack.

On the left, *Sinn Fein* stormed it in 2014 in the midst of anti-austerity campaigning and was then knocked back. Equally, Ireland's two competing and pretty much similar Trotskyist parties established a presence, especially

in Dublin working class areas, but are also back to 2009 figures. In addition, there were scores of Left Independents elected in 2014, a fair few of whom have lost their seats. While the left also did well in parliamentary elections in 2016, it's doubtful they'll do so well next time out. There are many reasons for this – amnesia over *Green* and *Labour Party* austerity politics combined with people's concern with environmental issues which the Irish Left (perhaps unfairly) is not associated with. But most important, the left's failure to deliver meaningful change at the local level where it was possible fed into declining militancy. Thus there was poor turnout in working class areas, the left simply didn't give people enough reasons to vote for them.

Another reason to highlight these electoral stats is because the left is far more electoralist than it was two decades ago. Then, Ireland had a strong platformist anarchist party, the *Workers Solidarity Movement*. It is now a shadow of its former self, having been

largely consumed by the battles around identity politics and with its members suffering from burnout.³ Sinn Fein has long abandoned its revolutionary republican past and its strategy has been to become a catch-all nationalist party rather than a radical socialist one. However, now it understands that this perceived lack of radicalism was one reason it performed so badly at the last elections and its trajectory may change.

In like manner, Trotskyists still refer to themselves as revolutionaries, but winning and keeping local and parliamentary seats (and the income from these seats) has become far more central in their practices. Recently, in a perhaps unprecedented move for Trotskyist groups, the *Socialist Workers Party* in Ireland was swallowed up by its electoralist front, *People before Profit*.

The result of this electoralism isn't all baleful. On the plus side the left is more grounded, more embedded in local communities and real world concerns than ever before – at least in the cities (though as we can see from the stats, not that embedded). Without doubt it's healthy for Left parties to engage in something more substantial than theoretical parsing or internal purity tests. But there's always a minus side, in this case it's the slide towards NIMBYism and a clientelism pervasive in Irish politics. That is, a style of politics which involves cosyng up to government structures

to get local amenities and perform favours for constituents. In this style of politics, it is important not to frighten the horses; if socialism is mentioned, it is in sotto voice to one's membership.

Winning victories

This is perhaps unfair. The left has also challenged these structures and won significant victories in the last decade. In fact, the largest political mobilisation in the history of the Irish state was in 2014-15 over the issue of water charges. It was an inspiring campaign that demonstrated mass self-organisation and solidarity, political nous and tactical innovation. Although earlier attempts to challenge austerity measures were unsuccessful, a militant mass movement sprang up over the government's attempt to introduce water charges in 2014. People had been squeezed enough by austerity taxes, and also understood that this was the first step in privatising water. Or as the chants went: "Can't Pay Won't Pay", "Water is a Human Right".⁴

The active involvement of some trade unions – *Unite* and *Mandate* in particular – and the fact the campaign avoided being captured by any one political grouping were key in ensuring its success. It was a genuine grassroots and community-based movement, involving over half a dozen large scale demonstrations of between 50-200,000 people over the course of 2014-15. More

significant than these protests was the depth of local campaigning against water charges. People mobilised locally to prevent the installation of water meters especially in urban working class areas, blockading roads and stopping private security guards and meter installers from entering their neighbourhoods. This was combined with electoral pressure on government parties and a successful non-payment campaign in which most Irish people refused to pay their water bills. This ended the attempts to charge for water or introduce fresh austerity taxes – at least for now.

Twenty-five years before the 2015 referendum, homosexuality was illegal in Ireland, yet in that referendum the electorate voted by an overwhelming majority in favour of same-sex marriage.

This victory wasn't magicked into being simply because of changing social trends; it was the result of years of campaigning by left wing groups. This depth of campaigning was even more evident in the historic 2018 referendum to legalise abortion. Abortion has been the battleground on which Irish culture wars have been fought for decades, an ongoing source of suffering and

humiliation for women in Ireland. There have been no less than four referendum votes on the issue since 1983, when a constitutional ban on abortion was introduced by



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On the social front, the left won two referendums, the first on marriage equality, and the second near-unbelievably, on abortion. These transformative votes demonstrated how Ireland has moved from being a socially conservative Catholic country to a liberal Northern European one.

a two-thirds majority. The left played a decisive role in reversing this vote; The *Abortion Rights Campaign* was established out of the Dublin-based RAG (*Revolutionary Anarcha-feminist Group*) and used an anarchist model of organising and coalition-building to establish a nationwide grassroots campaign. The

2018 referendum victory - also by a two-thirds majority is a shining example of what can happen when the left manages to organise, act strategically and convince people of its principles until they are seen as being simple common-sense decency.

A weak presence in weak unions

While these campaigns have left an important collective memory of winning victories, there has been no permanent shift of power. Free-market liberals have benefitted from these victories, possibly more than the left.⁵ The underlying reason for this is the growing weakness of the organised working class.

A second set of stats to chart the state of the left: strike days and union membership. Union militancy and density have not simply declined; they have collapsed over the past twenty years. During the 2010s there were only 26,291 strike days per year. This compares to over 100,000 per year in the 1990s, not exactly a decade known for industrial turbulence. Union density has also collapsed: 46 per cent of the workforce in 1994, 32 per cent in 2010 and only 24 per cent in 2018. This is barely half the coverage of twenty-five years before, with the numbers inevitably worse in the private sector.

The largest union, SIPTU has maintained its adherence to a service model, increasingly for older workers in

the public sector. Official partnership between government and unions – an arrangement which precipitated the decline of Irish trade unionism - ended a decade ago. However, the *Irish Congress of Trade Unions* remains tied to a zombie *Labour Party*, having maintaining their loyalty even when the *Labour Party* was administering austerity.

It's not all bad. Some unions, notably *Mandate* in the private sector, have shown an interest in the organising model of unions (on the basis of 'organise or die'). They were of crucial importance in the fight against water charges, getting involved precisely because these charges would impact their mainly-low income members. However, relations between even these unions and the left are often fraught, partly because the Trotskyist position of "One Solution. STRIKE!" hasn't been helpful in forming trust. Nevertheless, there have been efforts to form a political front – during the 2016 elections, the anti-water charges unions tried to establish a broad left electoral slate. While this wasn't particularly successful at the time due to the usual mix of sectarianism, egos and bad timing, this may be repeated at the next election.

The left, the far-right and the future

The situation is far from dire. During the recession, the left offered a credible challenge to austerity politics and prevented any shift to the right. It

saw off the attempt to privatise water and made Ireland a more open and socially liberal country. Its presence in local government may be diminished but it is still relevant and grounded in concrete local issues. Nor will the memories of successful struggle be forgotten, either by the government or the people.

But has the Irish left been tamed? The left has always suffered a justified credibility problem in working class areas; the smash-and-grab-members tactic beloved of Trotskyist groups isn't quickly forgotten. But added to this tactical imbecility is the larger ideological question of whether left-wing groups have been assimilated by the electoral system they are so eagerly participating in.

This is particularly problematic when it comes to combatting the far-right. The Irish left has been very successful at preventing far-right organising. A cheering example of this was the display of tactical coherence among wildly different groups when the Islamophobic group PEGIDA tried to organise a rally in Dublin in February 2016. Thousands of mainstream anti-racist demonstrators filled the centre of town, preventing PEGIDA from assembling there. Outside this central area, militant anti-fascists from anarchist, socialist and republican backgrounds physically attacked PEGIDA supporters spotted around town. That was the end of PEGIDA in Ireland.

Such spectacles of success aside, the main reason the far-right was not able to mobilise was because *Sinn Fein's* left-wing republicanism was the dominant strain in populist nationalism. *Sinn Fein*, to their immense credit still take a pro-immigrant line, but their dominance over populist nationalism is waning, now they are increasingly seen as a semi-establishment party.

Thus for the first time in recent times, the far-right have managed to mobilise and organise. They have been fuelled by online anti-immigration conspiracies, funded by rich foreign donors, and are feeding off and into a growing domestic racism. It's important not to exaggerate their numbers: away from the computer screens their presence remains miniscule and electorally they're still a joke. But assuming they manage to find leaders marginally less creepy, paranoid and chaotic than their current offering, they may prove a threat.

More central is the question of what the left can do to bring in a socialist, or at least a less neoliberal Ireland. This is especially hard now that the Brexit psychodrama has served to legitimise most elements of the status quo in Ireland – both the current government and the position of the EU. Currently the left is in abeyance, with a lack of direction and diminished activity. An example: once the water charges were won, many activists threw

themselves into a housing campaign. However, this hasn't gained much traction or public support, partly because of the complexity of the problems and difficulties of achieving anything, partly because of the multiplicity of possible solutions offered. The campaign, while ongoing, remains small.⁶

Left unity has been a constant catch-call solution to the lack of focus. Inevitably it was voiced after the disappointments of the last election. However the centre-left far prefers to work with the right than with *Sinn Fein*, let alone with those further to the left,⁷ who are all electoral competitors with each other. There is precious little Left-Green common purpose, beyond a still undirected awareness of oncoming climate catastrophe. So left unity among whom? And more importantly, left activism in what direction? Cast into a pragmatically oppositional stance and competing more with each other than ever before, the Irish left once again needs to answer this question.

Endnotes

1 I'm just talking here about the Republic of Ireland (RoI), not about the North of Ireland. Politics, with few exceptions are radically different in the two jurisdictions. One hopeful exception was the abortion referendum victory in the RoI fuelling the campaign for abortion provision in the north, where it's still illegal.

2 In Ireland, Republican is shorthand for militant nationalism, supporting a united Ireland, and broadly points to a dissident, usually leftwing attitude. The splits in Irish republicanism are legendary, but by far the largest group is Sinn Fein.

3 The idpol wars have hit the Irish left with the same vicious ferocity as elsewhere; leading to widespread disillusion over the quarrels between the dressed up idiocies of hipster Stalinism and the mean-girl one-upmanship of woke liberalism. Even the Trotskyist parties have been touched: it appears that the Socialist Party may split from its parent organisation, the CWI ostensibly over concessions to identity politics and electoralism, although in reality for even more trivial reasons.

4 "You can stick your water meter up your arse" was another popular chant. The government tried to install water meters outside people's homes to charge them for their water. Stopping these meters from being installed was a major feature of the campaign.

5 For instance the neoliberal Fine Gael Party benefitted in the recent European elections from the sheen of social progressiveness currently attached to it.

6 It's not all bad news; the housing campaign has tried to move away from a servicing-clients model of organising. Also the participation of ethnic minorities in the campaign has been very positive, not as clients of left-wing parties but as an integral part of campaign groups.

7 As demonstrated in carve-ups in local authority councils around the country.