

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8775>



Ireland

GE24: Changing of the Mudguard

- IV Online magazine - 2024 - IV599 - December 2024 -

Publication date: Thursday 12 December 2024

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

People Before Profit's (PBP) slogan during the election campaign was "End 100 years of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael". But now we are facing into yet another Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael (FF-FG) government. Why has this happened? Are we stuck in a never-ending Groundhog Day or does hope for radical change remain?

After the last election in 2020, escape from a century of FF-FG rule seemed not just possible but probable. The cycle of alternation between the two frenemies had finally been broken with the identical twins of Irish capitalism forced into a grand coalition, propped up by the Green Party with external support from right-wing Independent TDs. [2] The 2008 economic crash and the decade of social upheaval and struggle that followed had enabled Sinn Féin (SF) to steal the mantle of the largest party in the Dáil for the first time and it looked certain to lead the next government.

But now, almost 5 years later, FF and FG have returned with an extra 13 seats and are only one seat short of a majority - compared to 7 short last time. They are not any more popular than they were in 2020 - their share of the vote actually fell slightly (by 0.4%). But in a situation with little in the way of class struggle and where no clear alternative was posed, they were able to maintain and even improve their position. FF topped the poll at 22%, followed by FG on 21% and SF on 19%.

All that stands between FF-FG and another 5 years in office is a little negotiation with "gene pool" Independents and/or the coalition-loving Labour Party. Eleven of the 16 Independent TDs are ex-FF or FG and only jumped ship because they failed to advance themselves within those parties, or needed to disassociate themselves from an unpopular government decision. Veteran broadcaster, Vincent Browne, caustically observed that "There is no reason why we can't have a new government next Tuesday. FF/FG need to lock in 8 Independents, which should take an hour and a half". Left Independents who in recent elections have made up a sizeable chunk of the Independent vote fared badly: longstanding TDs like Joan Collins and Thomas Pringle lost their seats and former MEP Clare Daly failed to make an impact in Dublin Central. Veteran 74-year old Seamus Healy winning back his seat in Tipperary South was a rare bright spot.

Despite the numbers pointing towards a FF-FG government propped up by right-wing Independents, speculation is continuing about the possibility of a coalition with Labour or the Social Democrats, who won 11 seats each. Both parties increased their vote largely off the back of the collapse of the Green Party, which was punished for its role as a junior party in the outgoing coalition. Overall the vote for this "centre-left" bloc fell slightly, from 14.4% to 12.5%.

Leaving aside the careerism of the centre-left parties, the reason a tripartite coalition is still being contemplated is that the 20-year routine of FF/FG coalescing with parties or Independents to their centre-left has served them so well. The last government was a FF-FG coalition with the Greens, the previous one a FG minority coalition with centre-left and localist Independents (with confidence and supply from FF) (2016-2020), the one before that was FG and Labour (2011-2016) and the one before that was FF and the Greens (2007-2011).

In each case, the smaller centre-left component has been an excellent mudguard, taking most of the shit for the government's decisions while allowing it to change colouring slightly every few years - from lightest Green to palest pink to washed out rainbow to lightest Green again. Eventually the mudguard falls off and takes a further kicking from voters at the next election. The bike beneath remains clean and dry and ready for a new mudguard.

In many ways, this composition of the last few governments is an accurate political reflection of the economic base of Irish society. High levels of foreign direct investment (FDI) off the back of massive corporate tax breaks are pivotal to

the Irish economy, which remains completely dependent on US multinationals - not only for corporate and income tax revenue but for high earning jobs that support Ireland's large low paid service sector as well as the public sector. Official statistics show that foreign multinationals employ 27% of private sector employees (623,128 people) but pay 37% of total Irish wages and account for 71% of private sector Gross Value Added. The phrase "account for" is used advisedly as much of this GVA is made up of intellectual property and overseas contract manufacturing domiciled in Ireland for tax purposes.

In this context, FF and FG represent a hardy comprador capitalist class whose main concern is to maintain a model of economic development based on high levels of FDI and multinational corporate tax avoidance. Maintaining this base provides continuous flows of capital they can mediate and siphon from, in particular in the housing and property markets but also through high paid employment for lawyers, accountants, IT consultants and the rest of Ireland's professional managerial classes - whose socially concerned left flank makes up much of the social base of the centre-left mudguard parties.

The rise of SF, whose support base is far more rooted in the working class, had threatened to upset this sturdy Apple cart. [3] For several years after the 2020 election, SF had posed a real threat to the permanent rule of FF and FG. They won 24.5% of the vote in 2020 and as recently as April 2023 had peaked at 37% support in the opinion polls. Yet in this election they received only 19% of the vote.

So what happened to SF?

The proximate cause for the collapse in SF's support was the relentless attacks on them from the far right, who identified SF as their main rival for working class support. They incessantly spread outrageous lies about them on social media (like fake online ads for SF-branded burkas) and succeeded in problematising the rise in immigration from 2022 onwards and blaming SF for it, even though they were not in government. [4]

The reason SF were so vulnerable to being blamed for the government's actions was that since 2020 they had come to see themselves as a government-in-waiting and to act accordingly. Frontbench SF reps were shadowing government departments in preparation for becoming ministers, meeting with industry stakeholders in areas like housing and health and signalling their reasonableness at every opportunity. SF strategists saw moving to the middle ground as the way to broaden their support base beyond their blue collar base to white collar workers and the middle class.

SF reps increasingly sought to reassure the capitalist class and big multinationals in particular that a SF government would pose no threat to business-as-usual. Its finance spokesperson, Pearse Doherty, promised international investors at a meeting last May that SF would not make any significant changes to the State's approach to corporation tax or FDI. A briefing from Davy's Stockbrokers confirmed this, reassuring investors that "Overall, Sinn Féin's approach from an economic standpoint is more 'New Labour' than 'Corbyn Labour'".

Consistent with this rightward shift, SF moved away from presenting themselves as the core of an alternative government that would exclude FF and FG. After the 2020 vote, they had approached PBP and the centre left parties about forming an alternative government without FF and FG and even held large public rallies to galvanise support. However, they soon reverted to talking about a "SF-led government", phrasing that left the door open to coalition with FF if SF were the larger party. They repeatedly refused to rule out coalition with FF and rejected repeated calls from PBP for a left alliance for this election.

All this meant that SF were observably in the process of selling out their supporters before they even got into

government. They took their core working class support base for granted and the far right ruthlessly exploited this to their own advantage, pointing working class anger at the housing and cost of living crisis and suspicion of SF in the wrong direction - towards hostility to immigrants and the so-called "woke agenda". An exit poll carried out on the day of the election found that living standards had worsened for almost half of SF and PBP voters in the past year, compared to 71% of "other party" supporters, which are mainly far right. But even this understates the impact of the cost of living crisis for the hardest pressed sections of the working class and among young people, who were least likely to vote. Turnout in the election was the lowest ever at 59.7% - compared to 62.88% in 2020 when SF topped the poll for the first time. It was much lower in working class areas like Jobstown in PBP TD Paul Murphy's constituency of Dublin South West, where turnout was 39%. It is difficult to accurately measure the turnout among young people but it was certainly nothing approaching the Repeal referendum in 2018, when thousands of young people forced to emigrate by the housing crisis flew home to vote.

Over the last five years, left wing and progressive social movements have been thin on the ground. The only real exception has been the movement on Palestine, which is part of a vital anti-imperialist movement internationally but probably has the least purchase in the hard pressed working class areas targeted by the far right. The same has been true internationally - with a discernible downturn in progressive movements beginning in 2020. The pandemic played a role in dampening the climate and women's rights movements and in Ireland the far right spread its spores for the first time under Covid. Aside from the movement on Palestine, there has been little sign of any widespread resurgence in progressive struggle in the years since. This wasn't for the want of trying. PBP participated in (and often helped to organise) virtually every progressive movement or protest in the last 5 years, including countless demonstrations on Palestine, the cost of living, disability justice, housing, anti-racism and far right counter-protests. Yet ultimately, the persistently low level of struggle was an objective factor we had little control over.

The destructive role of the far right

Into this void, the far right flowed. Despite their tiny core activist base, they have succeeded in shifting politics to the right with the help of thousands of international far right supporters and social media bots. This has included the far right billionaire Elon Musk, whose takeover of Twitter in 2022 was instrumental in disseminating their message of hate - or in the words of Steve Bannon - of "flooding the zone with shit". Last April, a Sky News analysis of anti-migration hashtags concerning Ireland found that the majority originated in the US. This international social media support has made them seem like they have far more popular support than they actually do. Localised protests against accommodation for asylum seekers, including dozens of arson attacks likely carried out by a small core of extremists, also gained them huge media attention and made it seem like they had support across the country.

In retrospect, the far right riots in Dublin on November 21st 2023 were a key turning point for SF's support - and hope of an alternative government excluding FF and FG. The riots caused millions of euro worth of damage and turned Dublin city centre into a no-go area for many hours. There were arson attacks on buses, police cars and refugee accommodation and mass looting of shops. SF attempted to exploit the situation to gain respectability, responding with a reactionary law and order approach and attacking the government for its record on policing and anti-social behaviour. They moved a motion of no confidence in the Justice Minister - who was a target for the far right for introducing hate speech legislation. Instead of joining PBP in attacking the far right for deliberately fomenting the riots on social media and the government for creating the social deprivation that led so many young people in the inner city to gleefully join in, SF leaned into the right wing narrative that Dublin had become a dangerous place that needed a massive increase in policing. That narrative was substantially rooted in racist fears being whipped up around black and brown immigrant men, so it paradoxically strengthened the far right at a time when they should have been seriously undermined.

SF's law and order posturing also failed to convince the middle ground. Their history of violence and criminality was exhaustively exhumed in the media and by the government parties who portrayed them as cynics attempting to exploit the riots for political gain. From then on, SF's popularity began to plummet. It took a further hit following their support for a yes vote in the massively defeated Family and Care referendums last March - which were successfully exploited by the far right on social media as more fronts in the culture war. They had a terrible result in the local elections in June, winning less than 12% of the vote, while several far right councillors were elected in traditional SF strongholds.

Since then, SF had been scrambling around, taking rearguard actions to try to neutralise the impact of far right and anti-immigration sentiment on their vote. They reversed their stance on hate crime legislation they had previously supported and were widely criticised for dog whistles about opposing "open borders". Last July they published "a plan to fix our broken international protection system" that promised faster deportations and opposition to siting accommodation centres in working class areas on grounds of resources. This pandering to far right and anti-immigrant sentiment failed to revive their support as it fed into a pre-existing perception by many working class voters that SF were flip flopping and untrustworthy. It may have stopped them from hemorrhaging even more support to their right, but this was likely counteracted by losing support to their left. Then, from September onwards, SF went into further freefall after wall-to-wall media coverage of several internal party sexual harassment and child abuse scandals. SF's support bottomed out at 16% in October 2024, closing out an "Annus horribilis" for the party right before the election.

Refusal to rule out coalition with the Right

SF's campaign slogan, "Vote to Change the Government", would have been a banal truism in any other liberal democracy - aside perhaps from 20th century Mexico. In Ireland with its 100 year-reign of Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, it appeared radical. And yet, it was also immediately undermined by SF's refusal to say what that "changed government" should be. Despite FF ruling them out as coalition partners, SF steadfastly refused to do the same and rule out coalition with FF and FG. This would have given voters a clear choice between more of the same and an alternative government without any of the establishment parties that had ruled the country since independence.

SF were not the only ones at fault for this. The experienced and potential mudguard parties - Labour, the Greens and the Social Democrats - also refused to rule out coalition with FF and FG. Labour and the Greens were openly gagging to get back into bed with them and the Social Democrats refused to support the call to vote left- transfer left until the day before the election - after SF had belatedly done so. In reality, both these last minute outbursts of left unity were more about mopping up transfers from opponents than any serious attempt to present an alternative left alliance to the electorate. SF and the Social Democrats could have supported PBP's calls for a left electoral front last July and presented people with a clear left alternative like the NPF in France. Had they done so, the outcome of the election may have been different.

Over the last five years, the issue with the most potential for sparking a mass working class movement was probably the cost of living crisis. Unlike the housing crisis it had a sudden, rather than gradual, onset from 2022 and it affected a broader swathe of society. By 2023, a third of the population were living in energy poverty and grocery prices were up 20%. The emerging movement had its high point prior to the Budget in October 2022, when PBP helped to organise a protest of 30,000 people in Dublin city centre under the banner of the Cost of Living Coalition. However, the Government's unprecedented multinational corporate tax bonanza - running at €35 billion for the year in November, compared to a previous peak of €24 billion last year - enabled it to cut across any emerging movement quite effectively. Billions of euro were doled out in one-off payments, ranging from energy credits to double social welfare benefits. The same trick was played again in last October's Budget, with double child benefit and social welfare payments given to millions of people in November and again in December, right before and immediately after

the election.

This ability to temper the cost of living crisis helped FF-FG to buck the so-called incumbency curse that has toppled so many governments this year, including in the US. The latest Eurobarometer poll carried out in late October/early November found that 79% of Irish respondents rated their household financial situation as good. 63% rated the national economy as “good” compared to 35% across the EU-27. Those results would look very different for PBP’s support base which is rooted in harder pressed sections of the urban working class - the same demographic that makes up the neglected core of SF’s support but which makes up a fifth of the population at most. As mentioned above, half of SF and PBP voters had seen their living standards decline in the last year, compared to 35% of voters generally.

The incoming Trump administration has identified Ireland as a major tax haven for US multinationals and threatened to bring them back home for tax purposes so it is unclear if Ireland’s corporate tax bonanza will continue. This threat ended up being another important factor in the government’s return as in the final week of the campaign, FF and FG stepped up “Project Fear”, warning voters not to risk the economy by voting for SF - even though it had also pledged to protect Ireland’s corporate tax haven status.

People Before Profit’s election campaign

Faced with this combination of low levels of struggle and fears about the future of the economy, both SF and PBP struggled to make ground. PBP-Solidarity managed to slightly increase our share of the vote to 2.84% nationally by running candidates in almost every constituency, allowing us to easily surpass the 2% threshold for state funding of political parties. This also revealed that there is now a small “party vote” for us right across the country that we had not tapped into previously. In future local elections in particular it could make sense to run strong campaigns in several parts of Dublin and the surrounding commuter counties where we have never had TDs or councillors elected but where we increased our vote in this election.

Unfortunately, it was in our traditional strongholds that we struggled the most, causing us to lose more than a fifth of our vote in areas where we had TDs and 2 of our 4 Dáil seats. In Dublin Mid West we were squeezed by the far right and lost Gino Kenny’s seat. In Dublin South Central we were squeezed by SF and the Social Democrats and also lost our seat. In Dun Laoghaire where Richard Boyd Barrett had the safest seat going into the election, we lost 29% of our vote.

The only TD area where our vote increased was in Dublin South West but even there it was a very hard fought campaign. Paul Murphy had been badly affected by a redrawing of constituency boundaries that removed our best area but managed to hang on to the last seat and was re-elected on the last count. Preliminary tally data suggests we were able to resist the general fall in turnout in working class areas by getting our voters out to vote at a higher rate than voters for other parties.

The lessons from this election for the future point to the necessity of providing the working class with a clear left alternative to “FF-FG forever”. However, they also demonstrate the difficulty for socialist organisations of swimming against the tide in conditions where there is a low level of struggle combined with an economy and a government that can mitigate the worst effects of the cost of living crisis for most of the working class.

10 December 2024

Source: [Rupture](#).

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of *International Viewpoint*. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.

[1] The General Election in Ireland took place on 29 November 2024.

[2] TD, Teachta Dála, is a member of the Irish parliament, Dáil Éireann.

[3] Ireland's policy of sweetheart tax deals for overseas investors attracted Apple computers in 1980. Apple's European headquarters is now in Cork, Ireland. Apple has over 6000 employees in the country and represents more than one-fifth of Irish GDP.

[4] Immigration began to rise in late 2021 and early 2022 but this was largely due to catch up once Covid travel restrictions were lifted. The real rise in immigration happened after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. According to CSO figures, approximately two-thirds of the 160,300 "rest of the world" immigrants to Ireland (i.e. from non-EU countries excluding the UK, US, Canada and Australia) from March 2022-March 2024 were from Ukraine.