

## The Irish Elections of 2020

The following appeared as a series of articles for the online blog *Pearls and Irritations* published between February and July 2020. The articles examine in their historical context the election results and the manoeuvring that led to the formation of the new government. The online posts are as follows:

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### Part 1: End of the Irish Civil War?

14 February 2020

*Perhaps, after almost 100 years, the time has finally arrived when we can declare the Irish Civil War to be over.*

Elections in western democracies keep throwing up unexpected results. It has probably ever been thus, but since the Brexit referendum in 2016 voters seem to have taken special delight in confounding the predictions of the political pundits. And, of course, Australian voters followed suit in the federal elections of May 2019.

The latest example comes from Ireland, where from 1932 until the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), Irish voters tended to elect Fianna Fáil (FF) to government either in its own right or with the support of another party or independents. A notable exception occurred in 1948 when a motley coalition of five parties and twelve independents formed what was unimaginatively known as 'the inter-Party government'.

That result proved an aberration. In the six decades that followed, FF lost only four elections: one in the 1950s, one in the 1970s, and two in the early 1980s, a turbulent time when three elections were held in less than eighteen months. And, following the GFC, the incumbent FF lost the 2011 elections to its main rival, Fine Gael (FG), which won in a landslide, though it only scraped home in 2016 with the support of independents. On the whole, therefore, Ireland has had a relatively stable election record dominated by FF and to a lesser extent FG.

After more than a decade on from the GFC, one might have expected that the voters at this month's elections for Dáil Éireann (the 160-seat lower house of the Irish parliament) would have forgiven FF for the economic mess and returned the party to its traditional place on the treasury bench, with FG in second place forming the opposition. But that is not what happened. Instead, the voters turned against both major parties, punishing them with their lowest-ever combined number of seats and lowest-ever combined percentage of votes. In fact, except for the immediate post-GFC elections of 2011, FF has never before polled so badly in terms of seats won and percentage of votes received.

An even bigger loser was the Labour Party, which won only six seats with less than five per cent of the vote. That party, too, has never before done so badly, both in terms of seats and percentage of votes. Unlike in Australia or Britain where labour has been a significant electoral force, in less-industrialised Ireland Labour has never been a customary party of government, except occasionally as a junior member of a coalition with FG. Nevertheless, as recently as 2011, it won 37 seats with almost 20 per cent of the vote, more than FF on both counts.

The big winner, of course, was Sinn Féin, a party that before the GFC polled in single figures in percentage terms as well as in seats – if it was fortunate enough to win a seat at all. This month its 42 candidates won 37 seats to FF's 38 and FG's 35 and achieved the highest percentage of first-preference votes cast. Hence the somewhat hyperbolic headlines that have appeared in Ireland and around the world proclaiming an historic election result that has changed the Irish political landscape forever. But is that the case? Or are we witnessing an aberration akin to that of 1948?

I am an historian, not a futurist. It is difficult enough to uncover the past let alone to predict the future. But as the past holds the key to the future, it is worth looking at how the Irish party system has developed in the almost 100 years of the Irish state to try to understand the continuities and the discontinuities that might be factors in its ongoing development.

The first point to note is that, although SF only began to contest elections in the Republic of Ireland from the late 1980s, it traces its origins to 1905. The second point is that both FF and FG emerged from SF in the wake of the Irish Civil War caused when SF split over whether to accept the Anglo-Irish treaty that in 1921 ended the Irish War of Independence and established the Irish Free State the following year.

Prior to the split, SF had been united in its struggle for an Irish republic independent of Britain. Although the treaty conferred independence on the Irish people, it required the Irish Free State to be a dominion of the British Crown and not a republic and its jurisdiction extended to only 26 of Ireland's 32 counties. The remaining six counties became what is generally referred to as Northern Ireland, which remains a part of the United Kingdom.

So, the three main parties that this month won 110 of the 160 seats in the Dáil are the legacy of the Irish struggle for independence that occurred early in the twentieth century. FG emerged in 1933 as an amalgam of the ten-year-old pro-treaty party Cumann na nGaedheal (CnG) and other groups opposed to FF, which had won the elections of 1932. FF had been established in 1926 by the anti-treaty Éamon de Valera after he decided to seek election to the Dáil rather than to continue the abstentionist policy of SF. At the two elections in 1927 FF won almost as many seats as CnG, and after its victory in 1932 dominated Irish politics for decades. In the meantime, the remnant SF maintained its abstentionist policy until 1986. But it had little electoral success until after the GFC.

While these three parties owe their existence to divisions that occurred concerning the Anglo-Irish treaty, Ireland has changed significantly since the 1920s. In 1937 the FF government introduced a new constitution that made Ireland a republic in all but name, dispensing with 'Irish Free State' and taking the name 'Éire' in the Irish language or 'Ireland' in English. In 1949 the inter-Party government led by FG formally proclaimed Ireland a republic, adopting 'Republic of Ireland' as the official description of the state. Like the Cheshire cat, the cause of the split had disappeared.

Significantly, Ireland has transformed from a backward agrarian economy to an advanced 'knowledge' economy that post-GFC ranks among the highest in the world in terms of GDP per capita. Both FF and FG are centre-right, liberal conservative parties, while SF espouses a more left-wing, democratic socialist approach. It also more strongly identifies with the unfinished business of a united Ireland. But that issue will be determined ultimately by the people in the north, regardless of politics in the Republic, though a SF government in the south might deter some moderate unionists from switching sides.

While the makeup of the new government is yet to be determined, FF is not discounting a coalition with SF. Yet, given the economic stances of the parties, it might be more logical for

FF and FG to join forces in a centre-right government opposed by a centre-left opposition of SF, Labour and other left-leaning parties (or vice versa). But politics and logic do not always go hand in hand. Nevertheless, the GFC may yet prove to have been the catalyst that broke the organic bonds of the Irish party system, thus distinguishing this month's result from 1948.

Perhaps, after almost 100 years, the time has finally arrived when we can declare the Irish Civil War to be over and for the body politic in Ireland to adopt the party system common to most western democracies based on centre-left and centre-right approaches to managing a modern economy.

## **Part 2: Still No Government**

1 June 2020

*Almost four months after the Irish general election on 8 February 2020 Ireland is still without a government. What's been happening and who is running the shop during the Covid-19 crisis?*

Following the poll, news reports around the world proclaimed an historic election result that had changed Ireland's political landscape forever. Sinn Féin (SF), traditionally a fringe-dweller of politics in the Republic of Ireland, had received the highest number of first-preference votes, and with 37 seats in Dáil Éireann, the 160-seat lower house of the Irish parliament, was the second largest party.

The governing party, Fine Gael (FG), had won only 35 seats, while its main rival Fianna Fáil (FF) had picked up 38 seats. The remaining 50 seats were shared among 6 parties and 19 independents. Of the six parties, the Greens with 12 had the highest number of seats.

And so began the complex task of trying to form a government. After accounting for the speaker (who is a member of FF), a coalition requires 80 seats to command a majority.

For one of the three major parties to secure that majority without either of the other two, it would require a motley coalition of minor parties and independents that would be inherently unstable given the range of views across the political spectrum. Similarly, a minority government would face the prospect of indefinite uncertainty.

However, two of the major parties combined could form a majority government with (a) the Greens or (b) two of the smaller parties or (3) one of the smaller parties plus independents.

With both FF and FG signalling they would not enter a coalition with SF, it soon became apparent that absent a new election the only way forward was for traditional rivals FF and FG to team up. But could they agree to govern together? In the Australian context it would be like Labor and Liberal forming a coalition.

The prospect of a new election so soon after the last is daunting at the best of times, but during the Covid-19 lockdown it is particularly unpalatable. Conditions were right for such an unholy alliance.

In an article I wrote for *Pearls and Irritations* following the election, I recounted the history of the three main parties since the founding of the Irish state in 1922, indicating how they had emerged from opposing sides of the Irish Civil War. As a legacy of their origins, they have remained intense rivals for almost 100 years. Even so, over the decades, FF and FG have both become centre-right parties with little to distinguish them, apart from the long memories of their rank and file members. Meanwhile SF has become a party of the left, on top of its determination to see a united Ireland.

In the article, I wrote, 'Yet, given the economic stances of the parties, it might be more logical for FF and FG to join forces in a centre-right government opposed by a centre-left opposition of SF, Labour and other left-leaning parties'. And not long after, what was unthinkable before the elections began to look more and more likely as negotiators from the two rival parties met, and met again.

Then, on 15 April, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, on behalf of FG, and FF's leader Micheál Martin signed off on a framework agreement for a coalition government. Despite rumblings from some MPs and constituency members from both parties, the deal was sealed. The unholy alliance was now a grand alliance of the civil war's binary opposites.

When the document was released critics lambasted it for promising increased spending in a range of areas, including health, housing and a national living wage, while at the same time ruling out increases in income tax or the social security levy, as well as any cuts in welfare. In Australian terms the framework agreement was a recipe for the coveted magic pudding.

Cynics suggested it was designed that way to attract a partner or partners from the centre-left parties to provide the extra seats to form a majority government. Labour, with 6 seats, has so far resisted the bait. Labour has previously entered into coalitions with both FG and FF, but the experience has not always been good. They know too well that the junior partner in an *ad hoc* coalition tends to bear a disproportionate share of the odium when the government is later defeated at the polls.

The Greens too have felt the ire of their constituents after serving in government. In 2007 they joined a coalition led by FF, only to be wiped out at the 2011 elections. However, they seem to have put that bad experience behind them, attracted by the framework agreement's promise of a 'New Green Deal'.

In response to an overture from the grand alliance, Green's leader Eamon Ryan put forward a shopping list of 17 demands, including a commitment to reduce carbon emissions by 7 per cent each year, up from the current 3 per cent. The grand alliance replied, 'They are doable'. The magic pudding had just got bigger.

To further entice the Greens to enter into negotiations, Varadkar and Martin offered Ryan a commitment to introduce within the first 100 days of a new government a climate bill to enshrine in law a target of carbon neutrality by 2050.

In early May the Greens parliamentary party voted 8 to 4 to begin the talks. But they warned they would walk away if the negotiations did not yield 'transformative' change on climate action.

After more than three weeks the talks have not concluded, but nor have they broken down. But, even if the negotiating teams can reach agreement, the deal will have to be ratified by their party memberships. And that might present problems.

Many supporters of each of the three parties oppose a coalition: Green supporters fear the two big parties will not deliver the new green deal; FF and FG supporters, particularly in rural areas, fear they will.

John Halligan, a minister in the FG government, who did not recontest his seat but is constitutionally obliged to continue in office, told the national broadcaster, RTÉ: 'If you want my honest opinion ... Fianna Fáil can't stand Fine Gael essentially and Fine Gael can't stand Fianna Fáil essentially, none of them can stand the Green Party so what's this all about?'

Some FG supporters are now promoting the idea of a new election, buoyed by recent opinion polls that show that FG has received a 15 point boost since the election, the benefit of incumbency during the Covid-19 crisis.

In my earlier article I wrote, 'Perhaps, after almost 100 years, the time has finally arrived when we can declare the Irish Civil War to be over'. Nearly four months on, we are still waiting to see if that time has in fact arrived. Meanwhile, during the country's worst public health crisis, FG continues to govern in a caretaker role.

### **Part 3: Are We There Yet?**

23 June 2020

*After almost six weeks of negotiations agreement has now been reached between the leaders of Fine Gael (FG), Fianna Fáil (FF), and the Green Party (GP) to form a coalition government in Ireland.*

On 15 June, more than four months after the general election on 8 February 2020, a programme for government was signed by the three party leaders: Leo Varadkar (FG), Micheál Martin (FF), and Eamon Ryan (GP). It was an outcome many thought impossible – think in Australian terms of a coalition of Labor, Liberals and Greens.

In February the electorate gave the politicians an extremely difficult puzzle to solve, electing to Dáil Éireann, the 160-seat lower house of the Irish parliament, a motley collection of representatives, known as TDs (*Teachtaí Dála*). The governing party, FG, had won only 35 seats, while its traditional rival, FF, had secured 38 seats. Sinn Féin (SF), normally a political fringe-dweller in the Republic of Ireland, had picked up 37 seats. The remaining 50 seats were shared among six parties and 19 independents. Of the six parties, the GP with 12 had the highest number of seats.

Given such numbers, many thought a new election was inevitable. But the prospect of a second poll, daunting at the best of times, was particularly unpalatable during the Covid-19 lockdown. As explained in articles I wrote for *Pearls and Irritations* in February and May, despite historical and ideological impediments, conditions were opportune for an improbable alliance between FF and FG, the two centre-right parties that were the legacies of opposite sides in the Irish Civil War a century ago, and the left of centre GP, a product of the environmental movement of more recent times.

The 125-page coalition agreement signed by the leaders and approved by a vote of the TDs and senators from each party is called 'Programme for Government: Our Shared Future'. Its somewhat pedestrian title is more than made up for by the audaciously aspirational names assigned to its twelve 'Mission' statements: e.g. 'A Better Quality of Life for All', 'Reigniting and Renewing the Economy', 'A Green New Deal', 'Universal Health Care', 'Housing for All'. It seems everyone in this National Hunt race will be a winner. What could possibly go wrong?

Well, our three-legged horse Improbable Coalition has one more fence to jump before collecting the cup. 'Programme for Government' must be approved by each party's membership. In the case of FF, a simple majority of its 18,000 constituency members will suffice, while FG will leave ratification to an electoral college, a majority of whom are TDs, senators, MEPs and executive council members. For the GP, however, party rules require that two-thirds of its 2,500 eligible voting members must approve the agreement.

During the negotiations FF and FG supporters in rural areas expressed dissent at some of the GP's shopping list of 17 demands. Most notably they were concerned that the

agriculture sector would be called upon to do the heavy lifting to achieve the GP's redline target of an average 7 per cent per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030. Yet, political commentators expect that FF and FG members will fall into line with their leaderships, even if that means getting into bed with their civil war enemies, let alone a bunch of greenies.

As for the GP, despite the agreement's distinctly green tinge, there are many in the party sceptical as to whether FF and FG will deliver on their promises. Whether the sceptics amount to more than a third of the membership is yet to be seen. Some GP members will also remember the party's last experience in government as junior partner to FF in 2007. That led to the GP's parliamentary wipe-out when the government was defeated in 2011.

For supporters of the agreement, a potential disaster was averted when GP deputy leader Catherine Martin voted in favour of the agreement in this week's party-room meeting that saw three of the GP's twelve TDs abstain. Martin, who led the GP negotiating team, had initially opposed the idea of going into government with FF and FG, and early this month she nominated to run against current leader Ryan when a leadership ballot is held after the ratification vote has been taken.

Despite her role in the negotiations, there were fears that Martin would vote down the agreement. Her endorsement of it might be sufficient to persuade her fellow sceptics to vote in favour of the deal.

Voting is expected to be completed by Friday 26 June and, if the results are positive, the Dáil will sit the next day to elect *An Taoiseach* (the prime minister). Under the agreement that position will fall to Micheál Martin, leader of FF, who will hold the position until 15 December 2022. It will then pass to the leader of FG, currently Leo Varadkar. The cabinet will consist of six FF, six FG and three GP ministers, assisted by three junior ministers appointed by agreement of the three party leaders.

The elevation of the FF leader to the top job is ironic given that Varadkar (who will resign as taoiseach to make way for Martin) and FG are enjoying the best polling figures since FG came to power in 2016. According to a poll published this week in the *Irish Times*, Varadkar has a 75 per cent approval rating while FG's share of the vote is 37 per cent, up from 21 per cent at the February general election. Martin and FF, meanwhile have gone backwards, with the party on 14 per cent, a fall of 7 per cent since February.

And what of SF? The party has been rather quiet of late, no doubt awaiting the result of the negotiations. Its prospects will not be harmed by the formation of the new government. Its chances of joining a governing coalition this time round were always slim, given the animosity of the two major parties towards it.

With the advent of an FF/FG/GP government, SF will be the major opposition party in the Dáil. As such it will be afforded the airtime that oppositions are entitled to expect in a democratic system. This will enable SF to consolidate its position as the major left-of-centre party in the Republic and to put it in a strong position to gain seats at the next general election should the government fail to deliver on its promise of magic pudding all round.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. We must first await the result of the ratification process to see if Improbable Coalition will clear the last fence and pass the winning post. We are not there yet.

## Part 4: Habemus Taoiseach: Ireland has a new government at last

1 July 2020

*Last Friday evening, as white smoke wafted from the chimney above Ireland's parliament building, Leinster House in Dublin, the Ceann Comhairle (Speaker) came out onto the steps and announced to the assembled throng in Kildare Street, 'Habemus Taoiseach' (We have a prime minister).*

Soon after, the new Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, emerged onto the balcony above the exalting crowd and delivered the traditional address *urbi et orbi*.

None of that actually happened, of course. But an extravagant metaphor is warranted in this case, given that it has taken almost five excruciating months to form a new government following the February 8 elections for Dáil Éireann, the 160-seat lower house of the Irish parliament.

The delay was the result of the electors having cast their votes promiscuously rather than opting to give one party a majority or close to a majority of seats. The governing party, Fine Gael (FG), had won only 35 seats, while its traditional rival, Fianna Fáil (FF), had secured 38. Sinn Féin (SF), normally a political fringe-dweller in the Republic of Ireland, had picked up 37 seats. The remaining 50 seats were shared among six parties and 19 independents. Of the six parties, the Green Party (GP) with 12 had the highest number of seats.

That long-term political opponents, FG and FF, have entered into government together for the first time is of truly historical moment. As explained in an earlier article, they have been traditional rivals for almost 100 years.

Their enmity is a legacy of the Irish Civil War that broke out after Ireland's War of Independence against British rule. From 1919 to 1921 the Irish, under the banner of SF, had fought a bitter campaign against the British government. A truce in July 1921 was followed by negotiations for a treaty that was signed in December and ratified the following month by a slim majority of representatives of the fledgling Dáil Éireann.

While the treaty conferred on Ireland the same degree of independence then enjoyed by Canada and Australia, it denied Ireland the full independence for which SF had fought. Led by Eamon De Valera, the anti-treaty minority walked out of the Dáil and five months later took up arms against the provisional government formed to implement the treaty.

The civil war lasted less than a year, but the bitterness of the fracture has influenced Irish politics to this day. FG and FF are the successors of the pro- and anti-treaty factions of SF, while modern-day SF represents the rump of the anti-treaty faction that split when De Valera decided to form FF and take his party into the Dáil.

Following the 2020 elections, the numbers were so tight that the only practical way to avoid a fresh election, undesirable at the best times but especially challenging during Covid-19, was for FG and FF to enter into coalition. Before the elections such an idea was unthinkable, even though, as centre-right parties, there is little in policy terms that separates them. That the two traditional rivals might then invite the left of centre, environmentalist party, GP, to join them in government added to the improbability of a successful outcome, as explained in my most recent article.

But extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures, and, following six weeks of intense negotiation, the leaders and elected representatives of the three parties agreed on a *Programme for Government* that was put to their memberships for ratification. After a tense week of waiting, the results of the party ballots were announced on Friday night, with

each party overwhelmingly supporting the programme: FG 80 per cent, FF 74 per cent, and GP 76 per cent. The result of the GP vote was the most eagerly awaited as the party's rules require the approval of a two-thirds majority to enter a coalition.

The next day, 27 June, the Dáil met, not at Leinster House, but at the more Covid-appropriate National Convention Centre, to elect FF leader Micheál Martin as Taoiseach. Later in the day the Dáil approved the new cabinet. Adopting the metaphor of my previous article, the three-legged horse, Improbable Coalition, had cleared the final fence and gone on to win the National Hunt race.

Ironically, this momentous alliance between the two civil war parties occurred 98 years to the day when the provisional government deployed troops and artillery around the Four Courts, then occupied by anti-treaty rebels, in readiness for a bombardment early the next morning that would mark the beginning of the civil war.

Martin will hold office until 15 December 2022, when he will hand over to the leader of FG, currently Leo Varadkar, the former Taoiseach and now Tánaiste (deputy prime minister) in the new government.

### **Where to from here?**

The government's first challenge will be to maintain discipline within its constituent party rooms. In normal circumstances a governing party has fifteen cabinet positions to allocate among its supporters. Under the coalition agreement the spoils of office will be shared three ways, with FF and FG each receiving six portfolios and GP three. The disappointed ambition of those with expectations of high office will need to be carefully managed, particularly within FG where eight cabinet ministers from the former government have been relegated to the backbench.

If internal disruption can be avoided, the new government stands a good chance of a long honeymoon period. The *Programme for Government* is an aspirational document that if implemented in its entirety will deliver substantial benefits to the Irish people in terms of the environment, health care, education, housing, regional development, social security and welfare.

It is easy to be cynical about the *Programme*: it is ambitious, its language is waffly, it is largely uncoded, many of its aims are inconsistent, and it depends on a continuation of the current enthusiasm to implement it.

A case in point is the *sine qua non* of GP participation in the coalition, the target of an average 7 per cent per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030. This is a ten-year plan extending beyond the life of the current Dáil and one that is back-end loaded. In other words, the 7 per cent is an average figure to be achieved over the decade, with most of the reductions to be realised in the last few years. Achievement of this laudable goal will therefore depend on the goodwill of a government not bound by the present coalition agreement and perhaps with a different set of priorities.

Nevertheless, the programme is there in black and white as a yardstick against which this government's performance can be judged by the voters. If the government lasts a full term it will have almost five years to implement it. Substantial progress will be rewarded, backsliding will be punished.

SF as the main opposition party will no doubt hold the government to account over those parts of the programme with which it agrees and will expose to the electorate the downside of those parts which it opposes. This will be good for the democratic process in Ireland.



As the party that received the highest number of first preference votes at the last election, SF will be keen to build on those numbers with a view to being able to call the shots on the formation of a new government after the next election, whether that be at the end of the current term in 2025 or earlier if the government falls apart in the meantime.

If the coalition holds together and FG and FF find the arrangement works well, they might come to the view that the issues that divided their grandparents are no longer relevant to 21<sup>st</sup>-century Ireland and that unity provides the best chance of ensuring their centre-right beliefs prevail over the left-of-centre ideology of SF, Labor and the Social Democrats.

Then we will be able to say that the Irish Civil War is over at last and that Ireland's party system has aligned itself with most western democracies where politics is a contest between parties of the centre-left and the centre-right.