

Ireland: election results record decay of Fianna Fail

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The European and local election results in the Republic of Ireland have further exposed the advanced stage of decay of the main Irish business party, Fianna Fail. Expressing widespread political alienation with the government, Fianna Fail lost over 20 percent of their local constituency seats, and a European seat.

Its rival, Fine Gael, which in the last round of elections had largely been expelled from the capital city, Dublin, won back some local seats. But the major beneficiaries were Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which won a European seat in both Northern Ireland and the Republic and a number of local seats.

Recriminations following Fianna Fail's worst election result since its founding in 1927 saw leading party members trying to pin blame for the electoral debacle on its minority coalition partners, the Progressive Democrats (PDs), whose vote in fact held up.

Still some Fianna Fail members tried to claim that the party had been reluctantly forced on its right-wing trajectory in order to maintain PDs support.

Communications Minister Dermot Ahern told Fianna Fail supporters, "In economic and social policy, Fianna Fail rejects the notion that the state should take a back seat and allow unbridled market forces to shape our country.... Fianna Fail rejects the classic neo-liberal stance on inequality."

Ahern's comments, issued with approval from Taoiseach Bertie Ahern (prime minister), were directed particularly against the justice minister and president of the PDs, Michael McDowell who recently told the *Irish Catholic* newspaper that he was in favour of inequality. McDowell also criticised Fianna Fail for "being mesmerised by Gerry Adams [Sinn Fein's leader] talking about an Ireland of equals."

Backbench Fianna Fail Teachta Dála (TD—member of parliament) John McGuinness complained on television, "The face of this government has been the PDs. People associated us with all of the statements that were made. We're guilty by association."

Others called for the PDs to be expelled from the coalition government, and for Fianna Fail to stagger on in power with the support of a number of independent TDs.

But any suggestion that Fianna Fail has somehow been pulled to the right against its will is absurd.

The Progressive Democrats, formed in 1985 to present a programme of low tax and low welfare spending that would help attract, mainly US, transnational corporations to Ireland, emerged from within Fianna Fail itself.

Subsequently, there has been something of a division of labour between the two parties. In the development of the overseas investment driven Irish "Celtic Tiger" boom of the 1990s, the PDs have articulated the pro-corporate, low tax agenda, while Fianna Fail have implemented it through their large networks of patronage in national and local politics and their close relations with the trade union bureaucracy. This has enabled corporate taxation to be reduced from 50 percent in 1988 to just 12.5 percent at the start of 2003. The 2003 budget presented hundreds of millions of euros in further tax breaks to big business, whilst hiking up rates of indirect taxation, hitting the poorest families especially hard.

This arrangement continues to operate. For example, the PDs have long called for the privatisation and break up of Aer Rianta, the part-state owned airport authority which controls Dublin, Cork and Shannon airports. Tanaiste Mary Harney (deputy prime minister) and PDs leader, has made it a condition of the PDs remaining in

government that the Aer Rianta break up is pushed through. Harney is also leading calls for private capital to be invested in the country's still somewhat primitive transport infrastructure.

Fianna Fail has no objections to this. But to maintain relations with the trade union bureaucracy, whose agreement is essential for a new round of national wage controls, Fianna Fail had to delay its plans for Aer Rianta's break up. In the meantime, control of Dublin Airport is to be handed over to a new Dublin Airport Authority under the CEO of the Jefferson Smurfit Group, long standing Fianna Fail allies, and legislation is to be rushed through to this effect.

To cover their tracks, Fianna Fail attacked the PDs for being too close to Ryanair, the low budget airline which also wants to control Dublin airport. Seanad (Senate) leader Mary O'Rourke last week called for a 63,000 euro donation made by Ryanair to the PDs to be examined.

But Fianna Fail is also hopelessly corrupt. More than any other party, the building and property deals and swindles that characterised the boom years of frantic industrial growth were made by Fianna Fail. Many of these have been brought into public scrutiny, and corruption tribunals through which a steady flow of penitent public figures pass, are a permanent feature of political life. Current Taoiseach Bertie Ahern has not been directly implicated, but he was a protégé of former Fianna Fail Taoiseach Charles Haughey—whose name has become synonymous with corruption. Haughey once famously said of Ahern that he was the “most cunning and devious of them all.”

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Both Fianna Fail and the PDs speak for the extremely wealthy business class who have made corporate and personal fortunes on the basis of exploiting cheap Irish labour and access to the European Union market.

To the extent there are differences between the parties, they centre on Fianna Fail's key positions in local and national government and its close relations with longer established Irish corporations and private capitalists. Fianna Fail also embodies a great deal of experience in subordinating the working class to the needs of Irish-based capital through manipulation of the patriotic sentiment that is a residual legacy of Ireland's former colonial oppression by Britain.

This is another source of friction with the PDs. Harney devoted considerable time during the election campaign to attacking Sinn Fein. Echoing the Democratic Unionist Party of Ian Paisley in the North, Harney demanded that no local authority in the Republic should work with Sinn Fein until the IRA had fully decommissioned its weapons.

This presents problems for Fianna Fail, which is under increasing pressure now that Sinn Fein has established itself as an all-Ireland party and claims to be an opponent of the social inequality that successive Fianna Fail and PD governments have created.

It was on this basis that Sinn Fein was able to capitalise on growing popular disaffection, capturing 54 local authority seats in Dublin, and gaining ground in working class areas that have traditionally supported Fianna Fail.

Sinn Fein aspires to replacing Fianna Fail as the main party in Ireland. To this end, Gerry Adams has called for an alliance between Sinn Fein and the Irish Labour Party, and with a broad range of community groups and trade unions.

It is also difficult for Fianna Fail to claim to be implementing the US and British-backed Good Friday Agreement, which aims at creating a more stable basis for business investment across the entire island by integrating Sinn Fein into the Northern Ireland state apparatus, while sustaining the coalition with the PDs.

Thus, whilst turning on the PDs, Fianna Fail is also turning on itself. Government ministers have come in for criticism for refusing to campaign in the local and European elections, and most ministers saw the Fianna Fail vote fall dramatically in their own constituency. In a remarkable indicator of political necrosis, one commentator suggested that local TDs were loath to campaign in their own areas, for fear of creating a platform from which rival individuals would usurp their position as local Fianna Fail power brokers.



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