

Ireland's "Green" coalition: Environmentalists and Fianna Fail unite

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Green parties worldwide are already synonymous with spectacular renunciations of principle. Policies advocated, perhaps for decades, are dropped within hours of entering government. In return for some minor adjustments of environmental policy, Greens have assumed responsibility for aggressively advancing the interests of their own capitalists.

Still, the political duplicity displayed by the Irish Green Party in entering government with Fianna Fail and the Progressive Democrats is extraordinary. It is also a sharp indicator of tensions and instabilities in Irish society that can only deepen following the third re-election of Taoiseach (prime minister) Bertie Ahern, and his Fianna Fail party.

Ahern won the May 24 general election. Fianna Fail, though expected to suffer a debacle, lost only 3 seats in the Irish parliament, leaving them with 78. But its coalition partners, the Progressive Democrats, were nearly wiped out. The proposed alternative coalition of Fine Gael and the Irish Labour Party won only 71 seats between them, unable to unseat a Fianna Fail with whom they had no essential differences.

The result left Fianna Fail short of the 83 seats required for a working majority in the 165-seat parliament.

Negotiations were duly opened with prospective coalition partners, particularly the Greens, with six seats, a number of independent TDs (members of the Irish parliament), and the two surviving Progressive Democrats. For Fianna Fail, an alliance with the Greens was preferable in terms of forming a working majority with as few concessions as possible, to one with the Labour Party or Sinn Fein.

For their part, although the Greens had sent some signals to Ahern that they might be interested in a deal, this was not at all their public position. Shortly before the elections, Green Party leader Trevor Sargent was asked about a coalition with Fianna Fail. He rubbished the suggestion. "If pigs could fly, I'm sure that would also make news," he said.

The Green vote largely held up, not least because of their perceived opposition to planning corruption and to the war in Iraq. Sargent made his name as an anti-corruption campaigner on Dublin County Council and was once assaulted in the council chambers for his pains. He was elected as a Dublin TD in 1992, and became leader of the Greens in 2001.

In February 2007, Sargent told the *Irish Times*, "I do not see

myself leading the party into coalition with Fianna Fail due to its culture of bad planning, corruption and bad standards."

As late as May 1, 2007, Sargent ridiculed Ahern's continuing inability to rid himself of allegations over his personal finances. One of the Green Party's pre-election stunts was to throw a brown envelope supposedly stuffed with cash for planning applications in a rubbish bin. The Greens have repeatedly complained about the notorious entanglement of Fianna Fail with the construction industry. The party opposed corporate donations to political parties.

Even after the elections, Green Party Housing spokesman Ciaran Cuffe said, "Let's be clear. A deal with Fianna Fail would be a deal with the devil. We would be spat out after five years and decimated as a party."

Although the Green manifesto was as devoted as Fianna Fail's to defending Ireland as an investment base, it contained a commitment to end the use of Shannon Airport on the west coast for US military flights related to the war in Iraq, and insisted that all flights "suspected of illegal movement of prisoners must be searched."

The Greens also opposed so-called hospital co-location, a scheme devised by Fianna Fail and the Progressive Democrats to allow private hospitals to be built on land owned by the state-run Health Services Executive.

All this, reflecting the views of significant numbers of Irish voters, counted for nothing once coalition negotiations started. The talks were prefaced by Ahern refusing point-blank to consider any restriction on US use of Shannon. Two rounds of talks lasting many days followed.

The first round collapsed after six days over the Greens' refusal to accept hospital co-location, a deeply unpopular policy largely responsible for the collapse of the Progressive Democrats, along with demands for changes in the road building programme and legislative moves on climate change. The Greens were concerned that they would not be able to sell a deal to their own party, of which some 800 delegates would have to ratify a coalition at a special conference.

A second round of talks dragged on while Fianna Fail and the Greens haggled over the allocation of ministerial posts. But in the end, a deal was done in which the Greens accepted that:

* Iraq-bound US flights would continue.

* Progressive Democrat leader Mary Harney would remain in charge of the Department of Health and Children with a remit to pursue hospital co-location.

* A deeply unpopular motorway route near the Hill of Tara—an important archaeological site containing many structures covering thousands of years—would go ahead.

* The Greens-proposed ban on corporate donations would be ignored.

In return, the Greens got some extra money for education, a vague proposal on a carbon tax, some government posts and, it later emerged, a suggestion of a review of hospital co-location in 2011. Fianna Fail also threw a few million euros at the independent TDs to win their loyalty.

The Green conference to ratify the agreement, held in private, was picketed by anti-war protestors. Anti-War Ireland noted that “the Greens will have blood on their hands” if they refused to oppose the coalition. Inside the conference, one delegate accused the party of winning “Mercs and perks” and little else, while another warned they would be complicit in deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan. But the majority swept such criticisms aside and the coalition was endorsed by a huge margin—441 to 67 votes.

Party leader Sargent, having led his party through a series of 180-degree policy turns and cemented an alliance with the Fianna Fail that he had spent much of his life opposing, promptly resigned. Sargent informed a tearful audience that this was the “proudest day of my life.” He resigned because he had pledged to so do should the Greens ever enter a coalition with Fianna Fail!

Sargent shortly after announced that he was “absolutely” happy with Bertie Ahern’s reports of his personal finances.

The ministerial positions won by the Greens are in the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, and the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources. Henceforth, the Greens will have direct responsibility for the M3 motorway through Tara, and for the controversial oil and gas terminal at Rosspport, County Mayo. The party will therefore specialise in attacking sections of radicals and environmental campaigners that might once have been its supporters.

Another of the Green Energy Minister Eamonn Ryan’s early struggles will be to push through the government’s proposal to break up the state energy supplier, ESB, a move opposed by the trade unions and which will open up an attack on power workers. Fianna Fail and now the Greens intend to replace ESB with a number of companies, with the intention of “liberalising” the energy market—i.e., opening it up to private capital.

Ryan was particularly keen that renewable energy suppliers would participate in this. Doubtless, many a Green supporter has “ethical” shares in renewable energy companies, and many more will run their own “green” businesses.

This is a party representing a social layer in a hurry, which

feels no responsibility towards its own voters and which is bitterly hostile to the working class. How else to explain Sargent’s gyrations? The Greens sense that the exponents of green capitalism for whom it speaks are in danger of missing out on Ireland’s faltering investment boom.

Election promises based on growth rates of 5 or 6 percent are worthless. Revised rates suggest a figure of less than 4 percent, but this may also be optimistic.

A column in the *Sunday Business Post* by economist David McWilliams noted that the boom years of the Irish economy were based on a strong US dollar, low Irish wages, and easy access to European markets. With a falling dollar and a strong euro, Ireland is a far less enticing investment location. Irish workers are paid in expensive euros.

McWilliams went on to note the traditional response to investment drying up, and large numbers of workers potentially trapped with huge housing debts, would be to reduce interest rates. But this is impossible because Ireland is locked into the euro. He went so far as to suggest that the best thing for the economy would be to “cut and run, allowing the currency to fall in tandem with the dollar and reinvigorate our exporting sector”—i.e., leave the euro.

But he concludes that “there appears to be very little alternative to a recession, the brunt of which will be borne by young worker-commuters.”

In the weeks following the election, Green ministers have continued the party’s apologetics for Fianna Fail’s relations with big business. Fianna Fail’s fundraising tent is pitched annually at the Galway Races. Developers and local dignitaries drop by, and over the course of this uplifting event, bring Fianna Fail an anticipated 160,000 euros. The Greens politely expressed a hope of finding a “means to more properly define what appropriate fundraising is.”



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