

New Irish prime minister uses identity politics to cover-up right-wing agenda

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Leo Varadkar, the new leader of Fine Gael, took over as Ireland's Taoiseach (prime minister) in mid-June, replacing Enda Kenny. He expounded his enthusiastic support for LGBT+ rights to a large march in Dublin to mark gay pride weekend on June 24. Varadkar is the country's youngest Taoiseach at 38 and its first openly gay head of government.

Over 30,000 attended the rally, at which Varadkar declared, "I pledge as Taoiseach to use my office, for as long as I hold it, to advance the cause of LGBT rights, to press for marriage equality across Ireland, to speak up for LGBT rights around the world where under attack, and to push for the implementation of the sexual health strategy here at home at a time when it is more important than ever."

CEO of Belong To, Moninne Griffith, welcomed Varadkar's appointment as Taoiseach saying, "As Ireland's national LGBT+ youth service, we are delighted that the new leader of Fine Gael is a gay man, and now a role model for the youth who use our services across the country."

Varadkar is no role model for young people no matter what their gender or sexual orientation. He inherits a minority government which is propped up with the support of Fianna Fail and represents the interests of the Irish super-rich. It is this class that now backs Varadkar. Latest figures from the Irish Central Statistics Office show that just 10 percent of the population own almost 54 percent of the wealth, while 5 percent own almost 40 percent. In contrast, government imposed austerity, a severe housing crisis and declining wages and conditions have propelled the poorest 20 percent of households to owe more than they own.

Varadkar was a staunch supporter of the last four government budgets, which favoured tax cuts for the richest 10 percent. He first positioned himself for the Fine Gael leadership in early 2016 when as acting minister for health he cut €12 million from the mental health budget, which affected thousands of young people. A recent study by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) showed that young people have higher rates of

mental health problems than their counterparts in other parts of Europe and the United States. One in five young Irish adults aged 19-24 and one in six young people aged 11-13 are experiencing mental disorder, according to the study.

As minister for social protection, Varadkar introduced a series of measures against the poor and the unemployed under the guise of clamping down on welfare fraud. Last month, before becoming Taoiseach, he launched his "Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All" campaign, urging members of the public to call a special hotline and spy on their neighbours. Dublin city busses were covered with posters asking people to anonymously report their neighbours. Radio ads blurted out figures about welfare fraud, which have subsequently been proved false. Varadkar boasted that 4,859 reports had been received against social welfare recipients, compared with 3,332 last year.

Earlier in June, when these figures were debated in parliament, Varadkar dismissed claims that the state should be pursuing financial fraud instead of the very poorest in society by saying, "If that was applied to justice and Garda matters, you would be telling people not to bother reporting burglaries until you have dealt with all the murders."

Varadkar's verbiage about his sexuality, democracy, young people and LGBT+ rights is a thin veneer to cover his right-wing agenda. All political parties in Ireland and the establishment media now propagate politics which pushes and represents the interests of the super-rich, the rich and the upper middle class. This exceedingly comfortable social layer props up capitalism and is as hostile to the working class as it is anxious to promote identity politics as a means of furthering its own demands for a greater share of the national pie.

Propagating the cause of one's sexual preference while dispersing anti-socialist "fiscally conservative" policies has become the staple diet of the "socially liberal" upper middle classes and the establishment press. Because of British Prime Minister Theresa May's disastrous showing in the June 8 election, there have been calls by a number of Conservative media pundits, including Michael Portillo, for her to be replaced by Ruth Davidson, the leader of the Scottish

Conservatives.

Davidson, with her partner Jen Wilson from Wexford, campaigned for the Marriage Equality referendum in Ireland last year and appeared together in a Scottish Conservative Party political broadcast praising Conservative values. The video shows Davidson and her partner strolling along the Elie harbour in Fife as she explains how hard it was growing up gay in Scotland while expounding her class prejudice against the poor with statements such as, “When I was growing up you didn’t get anything for free, you had to work for it.”

Davidson recently described becoming Scottish Conservative leader as “the best move I’ve ever made,” even though there had been “dark nights of the soul” and “tears in the bedroom at night.”

Varadkar is cut from the same cloth. He takes over as head of government just as May is attempting to broker a deal with the European Union. Many of the rich business interests grouped around the lobby group IBEC have stated that this will cause years of uncertainty to the Irish economy. Although the level of unemployment has declined, the €65 billion bailout of the banks in 2011 and the slashing of public services has torn Irish society apart.

Material deprivation rose from 13.7 percent of the population in 2008 to 25.5 percent in 2016. Consistent poverty rose from 4.2 percent in 2008 to 8.7 percent in 2015. Over a quarter of unemployed people, 26.2 percent, now endure consistent poverty, an increase of 16.5 percent since 2008.

Child poverty and poverty within single parent households has also increased dramatically. According to the homeless charity Focus Ireland there are now 7,600 people homeless, an increase of 25 percent since April 2016. One in three of those in emergency accommodation is a child. In April this year there were 1,302 families using emergency accommodation, including 2,708 children. In May there was public outrage when it was reported that 12 homeless families, including more than 30 children, were told to go to Garda stations in Dublin because no other emergency accommodation was available.

Groups such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) have pioneered the use of gender and sexual identity politics that has now been taken up by the political right. They used this agenda to propel themselves into a wider acceptance by the establishment and the media. Everybody now laughs around the same chat show table, united by a shared agenda that class and the economic exploitative power of the local ruling elite and the international capitalist class is not to be the central topic for political dispute.

The SWP criticise Varadkar, saying, “Thankfully an emerging youth movement politicised by the marriage equality campaign, the repeal movement and austerity conditions won’t tolerate Varadkar’s conservative, ‘politics-as-usual’ style.”

But addressing the gay pride rally in Dublin along with Varadkar was Senator David Norris, who receives constant effusive praise from all political parties for his longstanding championing of gay rights. This has included being invited to speak at various meetings by the pseudo-left. In 2013, for example, Norris addressed a meeting organised by the Socialist Workers Party in Dublin. Billed as, “David Norris, Ailbhe Smith (SWP) on the LGBT struggle” at Marxism 2013, the meeting “would bring together hundreds of people from around the country to debate and organize resistance.”

Just three weeks after speaking at the SWP event, Norris went on to “organise resistance” in the Irish Senate—but against the working class and on behalf of Irish capitalism. He seconded anti-strike legislation introduced by Fergal Quinn, one of the country’s richest capitalists, which included the threat of criminal prosecution, massive fines and lengthy prison terms.

This laid the basis for proposed additional anti-strike legislation in the Dail, which Varadkar has insisted he will introduce, with the cooperation of the unions, over the next year. Varadkar intends to make state arbitration in disputes legally binding, thus making workers who take strike action outside the confines of the pro-establishment unions subject to new draconian labour laws. He has signalled that workers at Dublin’s light rail system (LUAS) who fought a lengthy pay strike last year, would be one of the groups subject to the strike ban.



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