

Ireland votes to remove blasphemy from the constitution and re-elects Michael D. Higgins as president

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The Republic of Ireland voted last week to remove the word “blasphemous” from article 40.6.1 of its constitution, five months after the country’s voters agreed to liberalise abortion laws.

Although no-one has been prosecuted for blasphemy since 1885, the decision, supported in every single electoral constituency, underscores the failing grip of the Catholic Church and a left and liberalising sentiment among broad layers of the population.

Some 65 percent of voters voted to remove the offence of blasphemy from the constitution, almost the same as May’s vote for abortion reform and slightly higher than the 62 percent who supported same sex marriage in 2015. Even Donegal, the only constituency to reject removal of the anti-abortion Eighth Amendment from the constitution, and Roscommon-South Leitrim, which opposed same-sex marriage in 2015, voted in line with the rest of the country.

On the same day, Michael D. Higgins was elected as Irish president for a second seven-year term. Higgins, who claims to be a socialist, won 56 percent of the vote for the largely ceremonial role, compared with 39 percent in 2011.

His run for a second seven-year term was supported by both Leo Varadkar’s Fine Gael governing party and the main opposition party, Fianna Fail.

Fianna Fail have been propping up Varadkar’s minority government under a “confidence and supply agreement” for the past two and a half years. The two-party duopoly has facilitated a vast transfer of wealth from the working class to the top 10 percent in society.

The Irish Labour Party, which was reduced to just seven seats in the 2016 general election, also backed Higgins, who is a former Labour TD (member of

parliament).

With the candidate of all the main parties a nominal “socialist,” the most striking feature of the election was the degree of political alienation among working people. The turnout of 44 percent was the lowest recorded of any election in Ireland since the foundation of the state.

Higgins, portrayed as a “national treasure,” with a “Miggle D. Giggles” laughing stuffed toy being sold in aid of charity this Christmas, won a record 822,566 first preference votes. However, only 1,473,900 people voted out of a possible 3,401,681. No doubt, the turnout would have been lower still without the poll to remove blasphemy as an offence.

Growing political alienation is rooted in rising social inequality and hardship for the working class. The Irish economy went into meltdown in 2009 when the Fianna Fail government bailed out the banks to the tune of €64 billion. Since then, the share of wealth owned by the ruling elite responsible for the catastrophe has been increasing dramatically. The top 10 percent of the country’s richest households holds 53.8 percent of the national wealth, while the poorest 20 percent of households now owe more than they own.

Emergency accommodation figures for September show that there are now collectively 9,698 homeless people in Ireland. The number of homeless children is now 3,829. There has been a steady increase in the adult figures as well, to 5,869. Last month 88 more families entered emergency accommodation. There are now 800,000 people living in poverty, one in six of the population and 700,000 on healthcare waiting lists.

During the crash property prices collapsed, builders went bust and construction workers left the country. As

the state went bankrupt, it cut funding for social housing and for the past 10 years no social housing was built at all.

Higgins, in contrast, will join the ranks of the very wealthy. As president he will receive €250,000 [\$US285,000] annual salary, plus another €300,000 as a special unaudited allowance.

While the greatest shift in the election was to “none of the above,” the poll saw the surprise emergence of a right-wing candidate, Peter Casey, a millionaire and television “dragon” investor from the Irish version of the BBC’s *Dragons’ Den*. Casey is an admirer of US President Donald Trump, and advocate of close relations with the United States and has previously expressed support for Ireland leaving the European Union (EU) along with the UK.

Over the course of his campaign, Casey repeatedly attacked welfare claimants, while claiming to speak for the “average working family of John and Mary with two kids.” Casey also attacked Travellers. Commenting on a dispute between Tipperary county council and local Travelling families who refused to take accommodation because there were no facilities for their horses, he accused them of “camping on other people’s land” and complained, “This is great for my property value now that I’ve got three dozen caravans down the road.”

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Travellers have long been the subject of discrimination in Ireland and suffer multiple forms of deprivation. Traveller women are five times more likely to commit suicide than the general population and live on average, 11.5 years less. Just 13 percent of Travellers complete secondary education and just one percent make it to university.

Casey’s other comments drew less media attention, but were of a piece with his attempt to mobilise support in the upper layers of the petty bourgeoisie and in more socially backward rural areas on an anti-working-class platform. Besides attacking welfare claimants, he called for the re-introduction of water charges, which were the target of widespread protests by workers in recent years. He also opposed liberal abortion laws.

Casey was originally predicted to get just one percent of the vote, but secured 23.3 percent, or 342,727 votes. His vote was lower in urban centres and higher in both

rural areas and among older voters. With the combined vote of the other right-wing candidates at just 14.5 percent, his “success” was duly noted—with Donegal Fianna Fail asking him to join their party and the right-wing tax cutting, anti-abortion Renua Ireland offering him their party’s leadership. Casey has offered to either become the leader of Fianna Fail or set up a New Fianna Fail.

The media is likewise urging a shift rightwards as its preferred response, with the *Irish Times* telling all politicians to “get real” and insisting on the “need for a more mature and realistic discussion about politics and the choices facing policymakers” and avoiding raising “false expectations.”

Sinn Fein’s inability to sustain its pretence of representing a left alternative to the major parties was the other significant feature of the election. Its candidate, Liadh Ni Riada, is currently a member of the European parliament.

Ni Riada secured a disastrous 93,987 or 6.4 percent of the vote, compared with 243,030 and 13.7 percent garnered by the late Martin McGuinness in 2011. Sinn Fein haemorrhaged votes to both Higgins and Casey, with the *Irish Independent* commenting, “Once proud outsiders who mopped up a fair few protest votes themselves, as Sinn Fein get closer to real power in Dublin’s Leinster House, they are becoming more a part of the establishment against which they have traditionally railed.”

The collapse of Sinn Fein and the Labour Party, and their eclipse by the right-winger Casey, underscores the urgent need for a genuine party of the working class in Ireland to prosecute a determined struggle for socialism against all factions of the Irish elite. The Socialist Equality Group in Ireland is seeking to build this party, as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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