

# Ireland: Socialists and Coalition with Sinn Féin

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As the likelihood of a Sinn Féin led government grows, the prospect that the government might include radical left parties as coalition partners looms. But should socialists take up roles in government in coalition with Sinn Féin? Are there circumstances where this might prove to be necessary? Obligatory even? Now is the time to debate this issue, rather than being rushed into hastily made post-election decisions that could have a disastrous effect for the left in Ireland.

## TWEAKING OR TRANSFORMING?

Its worthwhile beginning the discussion by reviewing how different tendencies of the left, in its broadest sense, approach the question of governmental power in capitalist democracies, concentrating on four overlapping projects with the proviso that, in practice, political organisations often span two or more of these trends or change from one to the other over time:

1. *Transformative project*: This is where the organisation or movement is serious about the project of replacing capitalism with a system of workers' democracy. Such a transformative change will primarily be driven by mass movements and will probably involve a series of crises in the social, political, and economic system. This approach is based on the premise that it takes much more than a change of government to bring about the end of capitalism. In essence, this is a revolutionary project that does not see politics as simply a matter of who is in government and, as such, is not fixated on the electoral cycle. It is a fundamental belief of this type of radical socialist or anarchist politics that we are engaged in a long-term project, not simply one of gaining a few bums on ministerial seats.

2. *Gradualist project*: Though the aim of this project is the same as the transformative one – the replacement of capitalism – the means are substantially different. Advocates of the gradualist project believe a deep transformation can be achieved mainly via the structures of the liberal democratic state, through the introduction of radical reforms by a left government. This “left-reformist” approach has enjoyed a semi-revival with the Corbyn/Sanders movements and, on the theoretical field, with the surge in popularity of Karl Kautsky's theories amongst some socialists, often to justify gradualist positions in current politics.

3. *Reformative project*: This is the classic post-WW2 social democratic project. It effectively posited on the acceptance that it isn't really possible, or even desirable, to break completely with capitalism. What is possible are serious economic and social reforms that would moderate capitalism significantly. In other words, Sweden (or nowadays Finland) is as good as it gets.

4. *Adaptive project*: This is an explicitly social-liberal, rather than anti-capitalist project. It proposes (but rarely delivers) reforms, but not ones that are in any way threatening to capitalism. This project usually combines a version of neo-liberal economics with some reforms in the area of civil liberties and equality, though often with an emphasis on image rather than substance. Epitomised by New Labour under Blair or the Irish Green Party in its current incarnation, such parties exist in the twilight zone between socialism and liberalism, so much so that it would be correct, in some cases, to question whether theirs is a left project at all. The term "centre-left" used by the mainstream media, usually refers to parties in this mould though it is sometime applied to gradualist and reformative parties as well.

Defining these different approaches is not an academic exercise in classification but is crucial to understanding how different political movements will behave in the future. It helps us to understand and anticipate where political movements might be headed. For example, a radical left party may call itself revolutionary, but in practice advocate entry into a centre-left coalition government which, at best, will engage in reforms without any possibility of a transformation to a post-capitalist society. It doesn't matter what label an organisation applies to itself, what matters is the actual practical direction of their activities. The Corbyn project was a classic example of this – it was explicitly a reformative project – proposing nothing that the Norwegian Conservative party had not acceded to over years of hegemonic welfare-statism. This is not to say it was wrong for radical leftists in England to engage positively with Corbyn's Labour Party or that those Labour members involved were insincere, but to argue against the illusion that Corbyn's Labour was something that it clearly was not.

Though largely outside the scope of this article, it's also worth noting that identifying the actual aims and methods of a political organisation does not constitute a full analysis of that organisation: an essential component of such an analysis also requires examining their social base: the class, gender, ethnic etc. nature of their voters, members, leadership, as well as the class-interests they represent.

## **SINN FÉIN AS (RADICAL) REFORMERS?**

If the radical left is to judge how to engage with Sinn Féin, and a future Sinn Féin led government, we need to start by identifying what their "project" is. Few would argue that Sinn Féin are proposing a transformation that moves beyond capitalism; even those on the left of Sinn Féin would regard that idea as a hopelessly utopian position. It would be fair to characterise the party as a left-nationalist party, with a strongly working-class base; a party that has the potential to engage in a serious reformist project or to retreat to a largely cosmetic adaptive one. So, an important question is the degree to which the party is serious about implementing reforms: how far are they willing to go? Few expect them to introduce radical economic reforms, but will they have the strength or ability to introduce a radical housing policy that provides decent housing for the thousands who are now without? Or introduce a universal free public health service?

While having no illusions about the nature of the party, it's important not to underestimate Sinn Féin. Unlike the social-liberal parties, they have grown out of a genuine mass movement that is rooted in working class communities, both urban and rural. Their base of members and supporters

are amongst the most politicised in their communities: this means that there is some pressure from below on them to deliver radical reforms. Whether they could sustain defiance of the intense opposition radical reforms would generate, will be dictated by the balance of forces, in other words by whether the pressure from below and outside the Sinn Féin government will be greater than the pressure exerted by capital.

In respect to what the possible outcomes could be, it is worth considering the balance sheet for Sinn Féin in Dublin City Council. Here we certainly see opportunism, acceptance of market values, and token protest rarely backed by serious campaigning. Yet there is also the occasional red line, when it's clear that the expectations of their working-class base puts pressure on them to adopt more radical positions. From 2014-2019, Sinn Féin, then the largest party in the council chamber, formed the ruling group with Labour and the Greens. (they had tried, but failed, to involve both FF and FG in the alliance). Under the council's housing policy during this period, the so-called *Housing Land Initiative*, public land was given to private developers to deliver housing in the O'Devaney Gardens, Oscar Traynor Rd, and St Michael's sites. Although Sinn Féin claimed to be unhappy with this policy, they generally supported the process, winning only one concession: an increase in the percentage of social housing within the Public-Private Partnership mix.

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*The O'Devaney Gardens sell off is a victory for Fine Gael's pro-market support for developers and landlords. Cartoon courtesy of Foxy Slattery.*

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In response to Sinn Féin's defence of their position, that given an FG-controlled national government they were making the best of a bad lot, Cllr. John Lyons of Independent Left and others on the left, argued the council should reject PPP, link up with housing campaigns and activists and demand a change in national as well as DCC's housing policy. When, in November 2019, it came to the key moment of voting on Section 183s - to dispose of the public lands - in [O'Devaney Gardens](#), Sinn Féin's actions displayed its vacillating nature: accepting the limits set by Irish business interests yet subject to pressure from below. The week before the vote, a local Sinn Féin councillor lambasted those who intended to vote against the disposal but then, after a backlash in the media and amongst the public when the pitiful number of proposed affordable homes on the site emerged, the party flip-flopped and voted against the proposal, having wasted the previous five years supporting it. Sinn Féin squandered any chance of creating a radical change in housing policy in Dublin through their ultra-cautious, non-campaigning, narrow, electoralist approach, which was only occasionally forced to the left by pressure from below and from the radical left councillors.

This experience in local government should certainly dampen our expectations of Sinn Féin in government but should not mislead us into presuming that they won't, in the right circumstances, be

forced to take a more radical approach. If they do make a serious effort to bring about some radical reforms which benefit working class people, while remaining within a capitalist framework, they will face an inevitable reaction from the right and the ruling class. Under such circumstances the radical left will need to navigate carefully to support and defend those reforms while pushing from below to force Sinn Féin to deliver on reforms that benefit working class communities. Which brings us to the question of how radical left TDs should approach the question of a Sinn Féin government. This is not a question for adaptive parties such as Labour, the Greens and Social Democrats (and possibly right-wing ones such as FF as well); we can presume they will have no problem in entering a Sinn Féin led coalition.

## **TO MUCH RUSSIA, NOT ENOUGH RECENT**

The history of the experience of the radical left parties in government can certainly be of benefit in illuminating this debate on coalition with or support for a Sinn Féin led government. While the attitude of various left parties to coalition government in post WW1 Russia or Germany is relevant, given the profound differences of circumstances it has limited contemporary value. The crucial mistake in historic comparison is to compare the dilemma of entering government in a revolutionary situation with the challenge of entering coalition government in a regular liberal democracy in a non-crisis situation.

This problem is clearly illustrated in a [recent article](#) by the PBP TD, Paul Murphy, in which he explores the question of radical left participation in government at length but mainly in relation to the experience of the KPD (German Communist Party) in the crisis-ridden 1920s and with no reference to the experience of any radical left, or even left-reformist, party in the subsequent century (Murphy, 2021). Murphy's conclusion, that the radical left should participate in a "*left government*" which "*pursues a revolutionary struggle against capitalism*" doesn't really leave us any clearer, since we get no inkling as to how that relates to the crucial issue of a possible Sinn Féin led government. Are we to conclude that, since SF are clearly not interested in "*a revolutionary struggle against capitalism*", the prospect of joining a coalition with them is being ruled out or, since Murphy doesn't say so explicitly, could it be that he thinks it is possible that a Sinn Féin led coalition could be such a "*ruptural government*"? While Murphy's intervention is welcome in that broaches the issue, it ends up being a lesson in history rather than engaging with the current situation facing the Irish left. There are of course no models or exact replicas of what a radical party should do but rather than concentrating on Germany in the 1920s, we would be better served examining the recent experience of left-of-social-democracy parties in western European countries.

Before considering those more recent examples it is worth pointing out that others in PBP have given a much clearer indication of willingness to enter a coalition "left government". [John Molyneux](#) (2022) dismisses the option of PBP being rushed or manœuvred "*to join this (Sinn Féin led) government lured by the prospect of office and achieving 'real change'*" but then quickly turns to considering the conditions under which PBP would enter a Sinn Féin led left government. Firstly, there is a clear understanding that this left government would be gradualist: one that would "take on capitalism", a deliberately ambiguous terminology.

The process of joining a coalition with Sinn Féin is outlined: PBP would negotiate on "core demands" though "*The exact nature of the demands will have to be determined according to the circumstances prevailing at the time*". Whatever this is, it is not a transformative or revolutionary approach, it is a plan to work with Sinn Féin to set up a government that would implement reforms within the constraints of capitalism. The list of possible demands, including taxing the rich, a major public housing programme, establishing a National Health Service, repeal of antiunion laws; etc. would

constitute major gains for workers if implemented but for a revolutionary party to enter a left reformist government to try and reform the capitalist system is counterproductive: every failure and compromise would belong to the radical party which in effect had chosen to abandon its overall goal.

There is enough ambiguity in Molyneux's language to allow PBP to enter government on a programme of less radical reforms, since to negotiate implies, by definition, the possibility that you will have to compromise on some of your demands. Of course, a left-reformist or gradualist position is an honest, though mistaken, position but one which is based on the view that a revolutionary or transformative position is utopian and should be abandoned. If members of PBP believe that a transformative project is utopian then it is incumbent on them to argue that case openly, in which case, in practice, they have abandoned a revolutionary position.

## **LESSONS FROM THE CONTINENT**

So, what are the lessons that the Irish left can learn from those more recent experiences in western Europe (those being the societies most directly comparable to contemporary Ireland)? First – something so obvious that it's easy to miss – in no case has there been a serious attempt to bring about a radical transformation of society, to begin the process of establishing a society and economy directly controlled by workers. So, while it is perfectly plausible, though from a revolutionary perspective mistaken, to argue for the participation of radical parties in a centre-left coalition government, it is simply contrary to all contemporary European evidence to claim that this is a step on the road to a radical transformation of society. One could argue that the radical left entering government might lead to significant reforms or might protect workers from a roll back of the welfare state etc. but there is simply no evidence that this could feasibly lead to a serious step towards dismantling capitalism.

In practice the outcome of entry into a centre-left government has been overwhelming negative from an anti-capitalist perspective. In two cases entry by the radical left into coalition has led to a party's collapse into irrelevance (Rifondazione Comunista in Italy) or absorption into the main social democratic party (The Alliance in Iceland) without even the achievement of serious structural reforms within capitalism.

We see a slightly different process in Scandinavia with the so-called Nordic Green Left: these are quite large parties that emerged from the anti-Stalinist wings of communist parties in the 1950s and 60s, ones that initially offered a democratic left critique of social democracy. These formerly radical organisations, such as the Danish Socialist People's Party, by entering coalition government with social democratic parties (and sometimes liberal parties as well), without challenging the fundamentals of capitalism in any way, have clearly shown that they are simply slightly-to-the-left versions of the social democrats. They continue to exist as a potential government partners for the main centre-left party but show no inclination when in government of pushing the boundaries much further than their partners. In effect the Scandinavian electoral market offers a variety of shades of pink, in the same way as Ireland's Labour and Social Democrats are fundamentally the same beast politically, with differences largely based on personnel, tradition, policy nuances etc.

The experience of left parties who have adopted the more radical approach of critical support for centre-left governments, without joining them, also deserves consideration as it is probably the most likely scenario for Ireland. In other words, the government survives thanks to abstentions or favourable votes from a radical left party that is not in government. Here the experience is mixed: for some policies the radicals were able to bring enough pressure on the centre-left governments of Denmark and Portugal to prevent their slippage back into a neo-liberal approach, though the impact



of this 'external support' on the electoral support for the radicals has been varied. The experience has been relatively positive for the Red-Green List in Denmark but this external support strategy resulted in a disappointing reduction in seats for the Left Bloc in Portugal's general election of January 2022 (the number of seats for Left Bloc fell from 19 to 5). Once the question of coalition is ruled out, as it should be, the issue of how radical left parties relate to a centre-left government from the outside then becomes central and hopefully this is the direction the debate will take in Ireland.

What then of the much rarer instance of a majority left-reformist/gradualist government? The first major instance of a left government coming anywhere near implementing significant reforms was Mitterrand's first government in early 1980s France. The French Communist Party entered a government with the Socialist Party that was committed to radical economic/social reforms (though still within the bounds of capitalism) but when, as expected, those reforms provoked an international and national capitalist reaction, leading to a rapid retreat into neo-liberalism by Mitterrand from 1983 onwards, the Communist Party were forced to withdraw and unable to formulate any strategy other than the desire to be a junior partner in a social-democratic government, fell into a spiral of decline (though obviously other factors also contributed to that decline).

The more recent example of the Syriza government in Greece is instructive. Here you had a governing party which was led by a gradualist faction though it contained significant revolutionary factions as well (it was also reliant on a small right-nationalist party as a junior coalition partner). The story is well known: the leadership capitulated under extreme pressure from the EU and international capital, demobilised the mass movements, and quickly mutated into a standard centre-left party, implementing neo-liberal policies. The lessons are clear: while left-reformist governments can sometimes implement radical policies they cannot bring about radical transformation beyond capitalism. To reiterate, a change of government is not a change in power.

So, the modern European experience reveals that entering a left-of-centre coalition is a tacit acceptance that the best that can be achieved are reforms that protect the position of the working class *within* a capitalist society. This approach displays amnesia or ignorance on the part of those involved regarding how power functions in a capitalist society. To think you can implement radical reforms as one government minister – socialism in one Department as it were – sidesteps the obvious fact that the state is not neutral, that power in a capitalist society is diffused through a range of institutions and that the ruling class does not rule exclusively through the state. It is to forget that the role of all governments in a capitalist society is to administer capitalism, to ensure to continuation of accumulation, albeit sometimes with reform measures that save capitalism from itself. The fact that no minister from any centre-left party, in both the Republic and the UK, has made any attempt to undo any of the Thatcherite anti-trade union laws that have been implemented in both states since the 1980s is instructive in this regard.

## **“GROWN UP POLITICS” - THE PRESSURE TO GOVERN IN COALITION WITH SINN FÉIN**

None of this is to trivialise the enormous pressure on radical left parties to enter coalition government when that opportunity arises. It is a serious mistake to see this simply as a matter of some inevitable process of socialist betrayal. Of course, there are opportunists who like power for its own sake in every organisation, in addition to party loyalists who will go wherever the leadership lead, but for many more there is the real force of institutional and structural pressures that push them in a right-ward direction.

Perhaps surprisingly, some of that pressure comes from below. Given the common portrayal of

politics – politicians enter government whenever the opportunity arises so that they can implement the policies they have advocated for – it is not surprising that many people who vote for a radical left party would initially expect “their party” to enter coalition government so that they can deliver on their policies and promises. This understandable popular desire for short-term results can lead to intense pressure on a party and can even infect the membership and leadership. The example of Democratic Left in Ireland, which initially positioned itself to the left of the social democracy, illustrates this problem clearly. At the 1994 special conference, where Democratic Left delegates voted overwhelmingly in favour of joining a coalition with FG and Labour, the most rousing applause went to a delegate who declared that they could choose to have Proinsias De Rossa as Minister for Social Welfare, improving people’s lives immediately, or they could choose what was characterised as the useless luxury of blabbing on about some future socialist society. To use a cliché of the mainstream press: it was time to roll up the Che posters and enter the realm of “grown up politics” of compromise and delivery. A cursory knowledge of Democratic Left’s pathetic record in government, and ultimate demise, indicates where that argument led!

Reflecting both the bias of individual journalists and ruling class interests there are two narratives regarding Sinn Féin in the media: one, declining, narrative sees Sinn Féin as a terrible threat to democracy but another which is now more prominent (and more representative of ruling class interests), reassured by their record in the North and local government, holds the view that Sinn Féin is not such a danger, as long as they can be house trained, i.e. pushed to drop the more radical aspects of their agenda. This media/ruling class pressure may also extend to the radical left parties if the question of coalition arises: are they going to be responsible and graduate from their immature radicalism?

Though the establishment certainly don’t actively desire the inclusion of the radical left in a Sinn Féin led government (an SF/FF coalition would be much more to their liking), they would rather Richard Boyd Barrett *et al.* as government ministers, with all the compromises that would involve, than the emergence of a larger radical opposition putting pressure from the left on a Sinn Féin government. A few post-Trotskyists in government would not cause many sleepless nights in the corridors of the *Irish Times* or IBEC: better to have them tamed on the inside. The fact that some journalists, nurtured in the Eoghan Harris school of anti-leftist outrage, would howl with indignation at the thought of “Provos and Trots” in government should not fool us: these will be the rantings of a dying clique, not representative of the mainstream of establishment opinion. Ironically, having radical left ministers in government might also suit the right-wing parties, who will have something to gain from left involvement in a Sinn Féin led government. While regrouping in the hope of benefiting from Sinn Féin’s failure to deliver the right-wing parties will also be glad to see the sting taken out of the left’s opposition to their policies. It’s hard to go from being a Minister who kept capitalism ticking over, to being the scourge of capitalism on the opposition benches.

## **ALTERNATIVES TO COALITION WITH SINN FÉIN**

If we accept that entry into a Sinn Féin led government would effectively process radical left participants into social democrats and remove them from any further relevance in debates about a radical transformation to a post-capitalist society, then we are faced with the crucial question of what, other than entering coalition, can or should radical socialists do? The premise here is not that a Sinn Féin led government would be same as a right-wing one or that the delivery of significant reforms by Sinn Féin would be impossible. Rather it is that because of the harmful long-term results, the role of the radical left should be to stay out of a Sinn Féin government but relate to it in a way that pushes it as far left as possible, while militantly opposing compromises with the agenda of big business.

The important factor here is that a few left TDs on their own won't make a significant difference: only a left that is organically linked to a mass movement can really pressurise Sinn Féin away from caution and retreat from reform. Remember how cautious Sinn Féin were on the issue of Water Rates. It was only a mass movement led by the left that forced them to take the non-payment position.

At the time of writing, it seems that a Sinn Féin government will not arise as a result of a mass movement but on the basis of a passive mood of discontent: "the rest have messed things up, someone has to change things, let's give the Shinnners a go". So, the left will have the dual role of transforming that mood into a movement to put pressure on Sinn Féin to deliver on their promises, while at the same time mobilising people to defend any advances that are made by Sinn Féin from the hostility of the right and the international ruling class.

## **DEBATE NOW!**

This debate on coalition will become redundant, at least in the medium term, if Sinn Féin wipes out the Dáil representation of the radical left. As this is a real prospect at this stage, discussion on this issue must start now, rather than when the next general election is called. It must begin with the widest possible debate on the radical left: a prospect that, at the moment, is inhibited by the top-down nature of debates and decision-making in the larger organisations of the Irish left where, traditionally, leadership groups arrived at a position and then a debate was initiated with a preordained outcome. Instead, what is necessary is an open debate amongst grassroots members across the left, where all possible positions are freely debated. This is not just the responsibility of organisations like Independent Left, which are wholly committed to those participatory and democratic principles, but also those within the main organisations of the radical left, PBP and the Socialist Party.

Such an open debate within and between organisations and throughout the radical left milieu as a whole, would allow those, such as Independent Left, who take a transformational approach, to advocate for a united left position that rejects entry into a coalition with Sinn Féin, while defending any radical reforms that a Sinn Féin-led government would introduce and opposing right-wing attacks on such a government. Pushing from the left but defending against the right. But that united left approach can only really happen if we have clarity on the issue long before Mary Lou gets called to the Áras.

**Colm Breathnach**

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**P.S.**

• Independent Left. 05/05/2022:  
<https://independentleft.ie/coalition-sinn-fein/>

*See also:*

Tomás Ó Flatharta. Looking at Things from the Left. :  
<https://tomasoflatharta.com/2022/05/11/socialists-and-coalition-with-sinn-fein-coltm-breathnach-independent-left/>