

TO COALESCE OR NOT TO COALESCE

THE TRIPLE-P STRATEGY

The Left in Ireland has always been pathetically weak. Since the Treaty, there have been two contexts in which it had to operate – the six and the twenty-six counties. In Northern Ireland, an ultra-conservative virtually one-party statelet established in 1920 under the Ulster Unionists lasted until 1972 and was ultimately superseded by the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 whereby Sinn Féin came into a power-sharing arrangement. In the Irish Free State, the situation soon developed after 1922 whereby the political scene was dominated by an upper-crust conservative party (Cumann na nGhaedheal, later Fine Gael) and a populist conservative party (Fianna Fáil) with the mildly social democratic Labour Party trailing a poor third. Other parties outside of or to the left of Labour were of minuscule significance.

By “upper-crust”, is meant a class base of big farmers (or ‘ranchers’), big free-trade industrialists, and the professional top notches such as well-off lawyers. “Populist” points to a quasi-social democratic concern for the needs of the small farmer and working class, accommodating SMEs through protectionism, and protecting petty bourgeois professional interests (e.g. teachers), among other things. Also, Fine Gael was Commonwealth orientated and Fianna Fáil more nationalist. Of course, these distinctions have shifted over the years since with both FF and FG seeking to appeal to all classes. The result is a kind of competitive centrism.

What is latterly quite surprising is that the liberal agenda has been taken up more by FG than FF. This agenda, in the Irish sense, refers principally to moral censorship, homosexuality, contraception, divorce, same sex marriage, and abortion. Reforms under the first three headings came under FF, while the latter three came or are coming under FG.

The broad pattern of the 2 ½ party setup lasted right up to 2016. Then, at last, a transformation occurred. The earlier situation of FF being the lead party with FG the second, which had been reversed in 2011, was confirmed and seems set to remain. More significantly, however, was the meteoric rise of Sinn Féin into third place with 23 seats and the humiliating reduction of the Labour Party to just 7. The opinion poll of 6.5.18 has Sinn Féin breathing down the neck of Fianna Fáil with 22% support in comparison with 27% for the latter [latest, 19.5.18: SF 24%, FF 23%]. The qualitative importance of this change for the Left has been that, now, the third party (SF) is a socially radical and nationalist republican one. This contrasts with the equivocating social democracy of Labour and its partitionist mentality. It also contrasts with what has been called the ‘verbal republicanism’ of FF.

The question is now what happens at and after the next general election, which is likely to occur no later than 2019. It is generally accepted that no one party can secure an overall majority of even one in the next Dáil. Therefore, the choices are between a minority government and some kind of coalition.

Several on the Left have often longed for an FF-FG merger or coalition, thus leaving it to some other parties in the Dáil to offer a Left alternative which would thus hopefully grow to the point of being able to form a government. However, it does not look as though FF and

FG are going to thus oblige and, besides, the other parties and independents in the Dáil are of such a disparate nature that it also seems fanciful thinking to imagine a combination among them of any significance in opposition, never mind in government. As stated, Sinn Féin is socially radical and nationalist republican; Labour is not reliable on social and economic policy and is permeated by anti-national and anti-republican attitudes, derived not least from historical continental influences such as those of Rosa Luxemburg and her ilk and the Austro-Marxists; beyond that, there are at least two varieties of Trotskyism represented, one of which is reasonably national in outlook and the other quite hostile to that perspective, while both evince a fundamentalism which is far removed from reality; a number of independents are nationally and socially progressive. This does not make for a current or future Left alliance of a coherent and genuinely progressive nature consisting of all the oppositional elements mentioned. It is an infantile dream and the one common factor of being opposed to FF-FG is far from sufficient.

The ideal situation would be that Sinn Féin could grow to being a government on its own or hold the lead position therein. But that is clearly not going to happen in the short term. Therefore, does one persist in opposition until such a stage is hopefully reached or consider alternatives? It has to be remembered that, however patient ideologues and activists may be in accepting opposition, the people are not going to sit around and wait for a decade or decades until meaningful change is arrived at. And why should they? They have bills to pay for livelihood, mortgages, education, health, and so on, and need jobs to provide income for same. Unfortunately, many politicians are not sensitive to immediately meeting these demands; that is to say, they do not live in the real world. Indeed, at times, one seems to discern in them a mind-set of ideological purity at all costs and, further, in some, a masochistic contentment with languishing as a political martyr forever outside the pale.

A defence of what is in effect perpetual oppositionism is almost invariably the assertion that if the Left goes into coalition as a minority party or grouping, it will inevitably leave it diminished with its chances of onward development being reduced accordingly. However, this assertion is based on historically inaccurate references. If one takes the recent historical period, the Labour Party suffered a setback after the so-called 'Spring tide' only in the wake of adhering with its FG partner to reactionary policies. For a few years after the formation of that coalition, the opinion polls actually showed Labour as growing in support. Therefore, it is clear that it was its cronyism and policies such as granting amnesties to tax-evaders and not coalition which resulted in its decline. As for the last debacle of Labour, this again was the result of reneging on its redline policies. However, there are those on the Left who persist in the face of the facts in enunciating and promoting the myth in question.

All this being said, what is the immediate realistic and progressive way forward for the Left in Irish circumstances? To begin with, the only political force on the landscape which is representative of socially radical and national republican policies is Sinn Féin. So, how should Sinn Féin react to the challenges it faces?

The alternative to oppositional correctitude is the Triple-P Strategy. This refers to Policy-Programme-Performance. Sinn Féin should promulgate the full range of Policy which it believes should be adopted in government. As it is unlikely to get an overall majority in the next general election or to become the lead party in a government subsequent to it, the next step is to engage in discussions with other parties about the possibility of drawing up a

Programme of government which includes sufficient of one's policies to make a resultant coalition worthwhile. The undogmatic approach to this is to talk to any party which is willing to respond, even if that is FF or FG. Although, up until now, the likelihood of arriving at an arrangement with FG seemed remote (but forget not the FG-Clann na Poblachta linkup in 1948). If one then does go into government on an acceptable programme, the task is of course to have Performance to see it implemented. While in government, SF should make sure it gains credit for the policies it is promoting. Should there be any renegeing on the programme, there ought to be no hesitation in withdrawing from coalition and clearly allocating blame. There is no reason to believe, therefore, that SF would suffer any diminution as a consequence of either situation. The reason why a negative outcome is always feared by some derives from their distrust of the people. What this implies is that the people are too wilful or stupid to understand a sophisticated strategy – ultraleftism at its worst! There is also the attitude that it has to be full-blown socialism or nothing. The Labour Party once proclaimed that the Seventies would be socialist; there is the well-known quip that rather was it that first the socialists would be seventy – indeed that is proving to be an underestimate!

The challenge will be to make one's members fully understand the Triple-P Strategy. There is a strong tendency to adopt the ABFF and/or ABFG attitude, i.e. Anybody But Fianna Fáil or Anybody But Fine Gael. However, that must be shown to be a simplistic and fatalistic attitude which can lead merely to self-righteous impotence.

Of course, the whole situation will depend upon what is called Dáil arithmetic. At the moment, an overall majority of 1 in the Dáil, after the appointment of the Ceann Comhairle (CC), requires 79 seats. After the last election of the 158 seats, Fine Gael had 50 (-1 to CC), Fianna Fáil 44 (now 45), Sinn Féin 23, Labour 7, Social Democrats 3 (now 2), and Green Party 2. The Trotskyists had 6, Independents Alliance (IA) 6, Independents for Change (IC) 4, and there were 13 Independents otherwise, some of whom might be classified as reasonably progressive. The alternative to the present government would be an FF-led one consisting also of SF and a component from at least 10 others in the Dáil. If FG and LP were excluded, FF (45), SF (23), IC (4), SD (2), GP (2) and progressive Independents (6?, including some from IA) combined would give 82. One could also view this as FF 45 and the Left 37. However, it is unlikely that such a realignment will take place in the present Dáil, not least because of FF's Leader, Micheál Martin, with his anti-SF obsession, and the current abortion controversy with FF split down the middle on it. But with that controversy out of the way, Martin quite conceivably ditched and the distribution of seats which the next Dáil will throw up, such a scenario, in one form or another, is not impossible. (In the next Dáil, there will be 160 seats, with 80 thus giving an overall majority of 1, after appointment of the CC.)

I wrote in my last book *Irish Republicanism - Good Friday and After* that: "The party ... which will never go into coalition may never go into government, if it is a small [or even the third] party, it certainly never will."

The day of reckoning is nigh.

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh, 11 May 2018