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Political developments, 2015

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Securing the recovery

The year 2015 was a busy one for Irish politics. The question of when the next general election would take place was only resolved in October, with the uncertainty leading to a flurry of activity and the development of a number of new political parties. Emphasising the economic recovery, the coalition termed year four of the programme for government as ‘Securing the Recovery’. The government continuously highlighted their role in political stability, which they argued had led to economic stability and in turn a social recovery.

According to the Irish Polling Indicator,¹ Fine Gael recovered from a 22 per cent low early in December 2014 and polled at around 29 per cent by year end. However, its coalition partner fared less well, with Labour polling at around 7 per cent at year end. Meanwhile Fianna Fáil incrementally improved its polling figures, increasing slightly from late March to 21 per cent. Sinn Féin seemed unable to get above the 20 per cent mark and plateaued at around 18 per cent, while independents and other smaller parties polled at around 22 per cent (see Louwerse, 2015).

¹ The Irish Polling Indicator aggregates all available opinion polls into an ‘average’ estimate of party support.

Brexit

Fears of a UK exit from the EU, or Brexit, increased in May with the election of a single party majority Conservative government in the UK and Prime Minister David Cameron's pre-election pledge to hold an in-out referendum on the UK's membership of the EU by 2017. The potential impact of a Brexit for Ireland thus moved front and centre, and the prominence of this debate is only likely to increase in 2016.

The Oireachtas Committee on European Union Affairs identified numerous areas in which a Brexit could potentially impact on Ireland, including EU decision-making; ramifications on the single market and the free movement of goods, services and capital; the free movement of persons, including skilled and non-skilled workers; as well as North-South relations.

The Guerin report

The long-running saga of the Guerin report continued into 2015. In May former Minister for Justice Alan Shatter, TD, lost his High Court challenge to the Guerin report as the court ruled that there was no denial of fair procedures to the former minister. The court found that the preliminary nature of the report did not attract the requirements of natural justice and that, even if it did, there was in fact no denial of fair procedures to Mr Shatter. Furthermore, the judge went on to say that he could not see how Mr Shatter, as a member of the government that decided to obtain and publish the report, could complain of its consequences. However, this was not the end of the issue, as Mr Shatter decided to appeal the decision.

Referendums in 2015

Two referendums were put to the electorate on 22 May 2015. The first was the proposed Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution to allow for the Marriage Equality Bill, 2015. The Thirty-fourth Amendment had support from across the political parties and saw an active youth campaign, with thousands of young emigrants returning home to vote; #hometovote trended tens of thousands of times on Twitter in the days leading up to the referendum. The high level of engagement showed, with a turnout of 60.52 per cent. The Yes vote passed with 62.07 per cent compared to a No vote of 37.93 per cent. Only one of the forty-three constituencies, Roscommon-South

Leitrim, returned a majority No vote, while the highest Yes vote was recorded in Dublin South-East. Ireland thus made history as the first country to back marriage equality by popular vote. The first same-sex marriages occurred on 17 November, sealing this historic sea change in Irish society.

The proposed Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution to lower the age of eligibility for election to the Office of President from thirty-five to twenty-one saw a very lacklustre campaign on all sides. The proposal emanated from the Constitutional Convention but it failed to capture the hearts and minds of voters, and from the outset it was eclipsed by the more intriguing Thirty-fourth Amendment. As the two referendums were held together, this ensured a similarly high turnout. In the end though, with a turnout of 60.51 per cent, the people decisively rejected the Thirty-fifth Amendment, with 73.06 per cent voting No and only 26.94 per cent voting Yes.

By-elections 2015

There was only one by-election in 2015, which occurred in Carlow–Kilkenny in May as a result of the vacation by Phil Hogan of his Dáil seat on his appointment as European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development. Fianna Fáil's Bobby Aylward won the by-election on the ninth count, with 27.79 per cent of first-preference votes, over Fine Gael's David Fitzgerald, who achieved 20.56 per cent. Sinn Féin's Kathleen Funchion came third, attracting 16.17 per cent of first preferences. Labour's Willie Quinn was beaten to fourth spot by Renua's Patrick McKee, who achieved 9.52 per cent of first preferences.

New political parties

The year saw the creation of a plethora of new political parties and groupings. Renua Ireland was the first to launch, on 13 March. Renua is led by Lucinda Creighton, TD, former member of Fine Gael and Minister of State for European Affairs, and also includes other former Fine Gael rebels Billy Timmins, TD, Terence Flanagan, TD, and Senator Paul Bradford, as well as Senator Mary Ann O'Brien and financial advisor and television presenter Eddie Hobbs as the party president.

The Independent Alliance, which calls itself a political movement rather than a political party, was launched in June. It does not intend

to have a party whip except for confidence votes in the government, and its stated aim is to hold the balance of power after the election. The group is headed by independent TDs Shane Ross and Michael Fitzmaurice, and other prominent members include TDs Finian McGrath, Tom Fleming and John Halligan, as well as Senators Gerard Craughwell and Fergal Quinn. Deputy Ross has said there would be no binding manifesto but that there would be a set of bills published in line with the alliance's priorities. The alliance intends to run at least twenty-two candidates in the next election.

The Social Democrats party was launched in July by independent TDs Stephen Donnelly, Catherine Murphy and Róisín Shortall. The new party has declared itself to be in the image of social democracy in Nordic countries and has pledged to abolish water charges and repeal the Eight Amendment, which introduced a constitutional ban on abortion. There is no one leader of the party, with the three founding members agreeing to decide on a leader after the next election.

The most recent political alliance was formed in September when the Anti-Austerity Alliance and People before Profit announced that they were joining forces to form a new left-wing grouping. The group's TDs include Paul Murphy, Richard Boyd Barrett, Ruth Coppinger and Joe Higgins. However, no sooner had the parties decided to join forces than cracks already started to appear, with a split between the two on joining an electoral pact with other left-wing parties under the Right2Change movement.

Right2Change is a coalition of community activists that is supported by five trade unions – Unite, Mandate, the Operative Plasterers & Allied Trades Society of Ireland, the Communications Workers' Union and the Civil Public and Services Union. The movement grew out of the anti-water-charges movement. It hopes to identify three candidates in each constituency who are supportive of its policy principles. Sinn Féin, People Before Profit, the Communist Party of Ireland, Direct Democracy Ireland, the National Citizens Movement and a number of independents have aligned themselves with Right2Change. The stated aim of the electoral pact is that voters should transfer their votes from one of the movement's candidates to another to help elect a left-wing government.

None of these new parties or groupings made major breakthroughs in the opinion polls. The Independent Alliance was polling the best of the new parties, with around 4 per cent, but the other parties were struggling to gain much traction and seemed stuck at around 2 per cent in the opinion polls. With the upcoming general election the fortunes

of these new parties could be crucial in the make-up of the next government.

Sale of Aer Lingus

In May the Dáil voted to sell the state's 25.1 per cent stake in Aer Lingus to International Consolidated Airlines Group (IAG), thus bringing to an end almost eighty years of state involvement in the airline. The vote was carried, with seventy-four TDs in favour to fifty-one against. Labour's Michael McNamara was the only government TD to oppose the motion, losing the Labour whip as a result and being expelled from the parliamentary party; however, in September he was readmitted to the party.

The vote was particularly contentious because of the issue of Aer Lingus's twenty-three Heathrow slots and resulting connectivity concerns. However, Willie Walsh, CEO of IAG, assured the Dáil that the slots could continue to be owned and utilised by Aer Lingus, and he also asserted that IAG was willing to guarantee that the slots would be used exclusively to service Irish routes for five years after purchase.

The Siteserv controversy

Potentially the biggest political controversy of 2015 occurred at the end of May concerning independent TD Catherine Murphy, who spoke in the Dáil about the business relationship between Denis O'Brien and the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation (IBRC) – the former Anglo Irish Bank – including alleged details of his loans relating to the company Siteserv.

The background to this controversy was that RTÉ, and consequently any other media outlet, following a High Court injunction, was unable to report on any details of O'Brien's relationship with IBRC. In the meantime, as RTÉ was appealing the decision to grant the injunction, Deputy Murphy, speaking under Dáil privilege, referred to some of the subject matter to which RTÉ had been enjoined not to refer. Deputy Murphy claimed, *inter alia*, that O'Brien had received 'extremely favourable interest terms' from IBRC when repaying loans.

These remarks led to a highly confused situation whereby large parts of the national media, including RTÉ, were unsure if they could publish Deputy Murphy's remarks. In the end the High Court clarified that the media can report on what is said in the Dáil and that there was

no intention by the court's previous decision to inhibit the entitlement of media to report on Dáil utterances. O'Brien claimed that the information was false and that it was an abuse of Dáil privilege. However, the Oireachtas Committee on Procedures and Privileges rejected the claim that Deputy Murphy had abused privilege. The legacy of this particularly acrimonious controversy is that it highlighted Ireland's rather outdated defamation laws.

Water protests

Water protests seemed to lose a little of their vigour throughout 2015. However, protests in Dublin in March and August still attracted crowds in the tens of thousands. The movement, as noted above, has morphed into Right2Change and has become broader than the original Right2Water. On a related issue, Paul Murphy, Anti-Austerity Alliance TD, among others, was charged with the false imprisonment of Tánaiste Joan Burton, TD, at an anti-water-charge protest in Jobstown in late 2014.

Migrant crisis in Europe

The influx of migrants into the EU throughout 2015 tested the solidarity of member states. Hundreds of thousands of migrants fled to Europe across the Mediterranean, mostly heading for Germany and Sweden, but many failed to get that far and placed increased pressure on Greece and Italy.

After months of negotiation a compromise was struck in September that saw a proportion of these migrants dispersed across EU member states. Ireland agreed to take in 4,000 refugees as part of its response to the crisis, as well as increasing humanitarian aid to the countries from which the migrants were fleeing, most notably Syria.

Northern Ireland Assembly in crisis

The Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly was thrown into turmoil in late September and early October, after allegations that Provisional IRA members were involved in the murder of Belfast man Kevin McGuigan Sr. The crisis erupted after a senior Sinn Féin member was arrested as part of the inquiry into McGuigan's death, which led to fears that the IRA was still active and that Sinn Féin still played a role in it. The Sinn Féin member was later released without charge.

The crisis deepened when Northern Ireland First Minister Peter Robinson stepped aside, along with all but one of the ministers from his Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). As a result of the crisis, a number of reports were commissioned to look into the possible continued existence of the IRA. One such report, commissioned by Theresa Villiers, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, found that the IRA 'remains in existence in a much reduced form' and that the IRA army council is still operating (Moriarty, 2015). Following the publication of the statement, Robinson said he would resume his post as Northern Ireland First Minister and bring back his ministers; however, he wanted talks which were underway between all parties to also include the issue of paramilitaries.

On 17 November these talks were successfully concluded when the latest manifestation of the Stormont House Agreement was agreed between the DUP and Sinn Féin. This saw the immediate crisis between the parties dissipate and was seen as another step forward on the road to better relations and peace between all sides in Northern Ireland.

Committee of Inquiry into the Banking Crisis

The 'Banking Inquiry', as it is colloquially known, following on from its start in late 2014, really accelerated throughout 2015. It officially ended its public hearings in September, at which stage the committee had heard oral evidence from 128 witnesses over 49 days, and had sought and received nearly 50,000 documents to date, amounting to hundreds of thousands of pages.

In early December the committee was working on finalising the report and, in order to have it ready by January and before the general election, it was decided to reduce the report from an envisaged 750 pages to 250 pages, dealing only with new information that emerged during hearings. A draft report was finally agreed on 6 December with two members of the committee, Deputies Joe Higgins and Pearse Doherty, declining to sign off on the report as amended.

However, there was a fear at year end that the time frame to publish the final report was still too tight, as the report had to be sent to interested parties by mid December and any amendments had to be considered over the Christmas period. In the event, the report was published as planned on 27 January 2016, noting amongst its conclusions that the banks' failure was the responsibility of senior executives and directors. The report was also critical of the European Central

Bank's failure to engage with the inquiry. Inquiry chairman Ciarán Lynch, TD, said that the report is the best possible explanation of what happened in the lead-up to the crisis, and that the findings and recommendations, if followed, would ensure that such a crisis would never occur again.

Economic growth and Budget 2016

Data released in October by the Central Statistics Office showed that gross domestic product in the first quarter of 2015 had accelerated by 6.5 per cent year-on-year while gross national product had advanced by 7.3 per cent. Furthermore the unemployment rate had dropped to 9.4 per cent as of September 2015. Following these strong figures, Ireland was expected to be the fastest-growing economy in the eurozone in 2015 for the second year in a row.

On foot of these figures Budget 2016 was the first significantly expansionary budget in eight years, with an increase of €1.5 billion in spending. However, it drew the ire of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, with its chair, Professor John McHale, suggesting that the government needed to do more to cut the structural deficit and be in line with European fiscal rules. After a strong and public rebuke from the government, as well as clarification from the European Commission that the Budget was appropriate, Professor McHale retracted his comments. However, this did not end the matter, with The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council saying in late November, in its formal assessment of the budget, that the adoption of €1.5 billion in supplementary spending for 2015 marked a 'deviation from prudent policy', which should not be repeated.

Other significant political events in 2015

On 20 May Prince Charles visited the scene of Lord Mountbatten's murder by the IRA, in Mullaghmore, Co. Sligo, thirty-six years after the event. As part of his four-day visit, the prince continued the theme of reconciliation by meeting and shaking hands with Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams.

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