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# Fine Gael in spendthrift role reversal with Fianna Fáil

**T**here was a time, after the late-stage dessication of Bertie Ahern's administration in the 2000s when Fine Gaelers – including a young Turk called Varadkar – used to delight in listing out the various financial and political calamities that had been overseen so expertly by Fianna Fáil ministers. Decentralisation, PPars, e-voting, the Bertie Bowl, Thornton Hall etc. How the Fine Gael conferences used to hoot and cheer. How Fine Gael backbenchers used to sit back and enjoy Varadkar's Dáil excoriations, perhaps thinking that boy is going places.

But as the Taoiseach, like anyone who has ever done the job, has learned, being in government is a bit trickier than the opposition pretends. As remarked hereabouts before, the decisions facing ministers are often not between a good option and a bad option, but between two bad options. This week, the Cabinet rubber-stamped the decision made by the Taoiseach some time ago when he made his choice between the two bad options. One option (he was advised) was financially unwise; the other – cancelling the project – he knew to be politically toxic. As politicians are likely to do, especially in sight of an election, he chose the first option. This is not surprising – what was remarkable is that it was delayed, conceived, framed and communicated in a way that continues to put the Government on the defensive. It takes special skill to turn a €3 billion investment package into a political crisis. Poor Paschal Donohoe hasn't looked this awkward since he insisted that the Department of Health would be made stick to its budget.

Mind you, let's be clear: no matter what the Government decided on the rural broadband plan, the Opposition would criticise it. And the media would seek to pick holes in it. That is, in part, our role in all this. But we are, let me assure you, unaccustomed to having allies at the very centre of government to assist us in that task.

## **Expenditure objections**

The objections of the Department of Public Expenditure to the broadband plan were extraordinarily vehement and extraordinarily public. This is not the way government business normally happens. It is clear that the senior civil servants involved, led by the department's secretary general Robert Watt, someone who

has been an indispensable figure in government since the financial crisis and instrumental in the State's recovery from that period, felt that this project was not just a run-of-the-mill mistake. They felt it was something much bigger than that.

Watt was, I think, seeking to speak truth to power. He is both clever and courageous. But that doesn't mean that he is right about everything. Ministers are entitled to make different decisions. The broadband plan looks seriously misconstrued to me on grounds of risk-sharing, cost, and prospective take-up but I am not sure that the claim it represents an unprecedented risk to the exchequer entirely stacks up.

It might be unwise, but I don't think it will be catastrophic. It is, after all, €3 billion over several years while we spend €16 billion every year on the health service. That bill has gone up by €4 billion in the last four years. And that €4 billion extra is recurring – it has to be paid every year. The Department of Public Expenditure has been less vocal about that money, in public anyway. It may choose to be more forthright in the future. The next budget, if this Government gets to do one, may be a lot more difficult.

For all the week's bombast on one side and ululations on the other, though, it is hard to see this as a political game-changer in either direction. Interestingly, I am

given to understand that, in their inner sancta sanctorum, both the Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil hierarchies were not displeased with the week's events.

Fine Gael believes that rural Ireland will get the message that the Government cares about it and wants to put its (that is, our) money where its mouth is. Fianna Fáil believes that puts another nail in the coffin of Fine Gael's claims to be the party of economic responsibility. Both views have merit; I tend towards Fine Gael's view in the short term, and Fianna Fáil's over the longer term.

It will certainly be difficult for Fine Gael to present itself as the champions of fiscal prudence in a future general election campaign. That may be significant because the credibility of promises to cut tax – as Varadkar has signalled will be central to the Fine Gael offer – hangs on a

reputation for fiscal and economic competence. To say the least of it, that is under pressure now.

Where Varadkar once delighted in listing Fianna Fáil's sins, now Fine Gael has assembled its own impressive list and Varadkar will find Micheál Martin throwing the children's hospital, broadband and unchecked budget overruns elsewhere at him. Paschal Donohoe's apparent discomfort in insisting that the money would be found somewhere and that no existing projects would be harmed in the making of this movie suggested that he may understand this quite clearly.

Readers who remember a time before our present enlightened age may find this reversal of the traditional roles occupied by the big two parties amusing – Fine Gael in government bungling billions at rural Ireland before an election, Fianna Fáil in opposition tut-tutting about the irresponsibility of it all. You'd be amazed, says a person who monitors local radio and newspapers, at the amount of grants announced in local media this week. Fancy that. Enda Kenny once said his ambition was to replace Fianna Fáil as the largest party and the natural party of government. Are we there yet? "I suppose it makes us more like Fianna Fáil," one Government insider with mixed feelings told me during the week. "Maybe that means we should win the next election."

## Pat Leahy

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**It takes special skill to turn a €3 billion investment package into a political crisis**



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# The North's politicians aren't the world's worst – just

Is there a place in the western world worse served by its politicians than Northern Ireland? Last week's Irish Times/Ipsos MRBI poll reflected a colossal public disaffection with politicians in Northern Ireland, principally those from Sinn Féin and the DUP.

Huge majorities – of all voters and, strikingly, in the two parties' own communities – disapprove of their own leaders. Unionists and nationalists alike are opposed to the Brexit policy of the DUP; similarly, both communities – including rather more nationalists than unionists – want Sinn Féin to represent them at Westminster, a point especially relevant in a week that saw majorities of two and four on vital votes.

Of course this would require Sinn Féin to get off the high horse of abstentionist principle. But hasn't the last three and a bit decades been a series of careful dismounts by the party?

Despair at their politicians unites voters from all backgrounds. But is it any wonder? We are now more than two years without an Assembly and Executive at Stormont, collapsed by Sinn Féin on the pretext of a hooky scheme to promote the use of green energy. It looks to me like the party had other reasons to collapse the institutions – they didn't want to execute the transition in leadership from Martin McGuinness to Michelle O'Neill while in office. They were also fed up of the frequently sectarian-smelling obstructionism of the DUP. I am not sure the party really wants Northern Ireland to work as a political entity.

The moving of the goalposts since to an Irish-language act, same-sex marriage and abortion rights for the North deepens my suspicion on the point – as does the party's constant drum-banging for a unity referendum. If you wanted a consensual model of Irish unity, would you really be demanding a referendum and gloating about how inevitable it is at a time of heightened unionist anxiety about the future of the union between Great Britain and the North?

Sinn Féin says that Brexit is an existential crisis for the North. And that it won't do anything about it. Hands up if you see a bit of a contradiction there.

The myopia of the DUP is worse. Sinn Féin is refusing to help; the DUP is making things a lot worse. It could have used its leverage in Westminster to design a Brexit that delivered unprecedented opportunities to Northern Ireland – the best of both economic worlds, with a foot in both the

EU and the UK. Instead it failed to find its way out from under its ancestral fears and chose to see constitutional betrayal behind every bush, pandering to its base rather than trying to lead it.

### **Disaster for North**

Offered a golden opportunity, the DUP confidence-and-supply clout at Westminster has turned out to be a disaster for the North – something now explicitly recognised not just by the electorate in the North at large, but by the DUP’s own voters. What a political failure.

Finola Meredith’s column on these pages this week about the North – which she described as sectarian, stunted and dysfunctional – was deeply depressing. The North’s politics show no sign it has the vision or ability to move society away from these ills. And yet, the answer to the question at the top of this column is, of course: yes, there is somewhere worse served by its politicians than the North – the rest of the United Kingdom.

It’s hard to think of another person who rose to such high office but who failed so spectacularly when they got there as Theresa May. It is an unfortunate quirk of history that someone so lacking in judgment, vision and – most of all, perhaps – political ability should become the country’s leader when someone with those qualities was so desperately required.

Normally, you have to be quite good at politics to become prime minister. Not

this one. The haplessness of failing to square off her own attorney general – into whose hands she then placed her fate – in advance of concluding a deal with Jean Claude Juncker on Monday evening was quite breathtaking. You should have heard the expletives in Government Buildings in Dublin. And she’s hardly the worst of them. Her Brexit secretary closed a debate in Westminster on Thursday with “I commend this motion to the House” and then voted against it. The chief whip – *the chief whip* – abstained. How did these bozos ever run an empire?

It is the great British misfortune that at the

time when the country most needed a credible party of government leading the opposition, the Labour Party is led by Jeremy Corbyn. Readers can make up their own minds about Corbyn, an old-style revolutionary socialist whose choice in international comrades runs from Iran, to Hezbollah, to the wreckers of Venezuela to the pre-ceasefire IRA. I am not sure there is any great unifying political philosophy binding his positions together other than reflexive anti-westernism, anti-capitalism and especially anti-Americanism.

That's fair enough; lots of people share some or many of these attitudes, though they tend to do so from the material comfort and within the political freedoms that western countries routinely provide. But what seems indisputable is that the attitudes and the policies which spring from them undermine Corbyn and his party as a viable government in the UK.

Were Labour led by any of its previous five leaders, it would surely be out of sight of the Conservatives in the opinion polls now rather than trailing them. Labour would be functioning as a government-in-waiting. This would in turn keep all but the most swivel-eyed of Brexiteers in line.

There are many failures of government and of politicians of all parties here, and from them spring social and structural problems which ail our country and our public life. But we should perhaps observe that in comparison to the nearby competition, they could be an awful lot worse.

# Pat Leahy

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**The haplessness of failing to square off her own attorney general ... in advance of concluding a deal with Jean Claude Juncker was quite breathtaking. You should have heard the expletives in Government Buildings in Dublin**





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**Opinion & Analysis**

**Pat Leahy**  
McDonnell's political strategy starting to unravel

**66**

**German lawmakers cut their own throats**

**I saw at first-hand the problems in our hospitals**



**66**

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# McDonald's political strategy starting to unravel

**T**his is the most difficult period so far in Mary Lou McDonald's leadership of Sinn Féin.

The presidential election was a disaster for the party. Brexit is focusing attention on the party's abdication of its responsibility to form an administration at Stormont. And, perhaps most significantly, Brexit has undermined her medium-term political strategy of coalition with Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil.

This is not a crisis for McDonald's leadership; her polling numbers are high (if a bit flaky, I think) and party discipline wouldn't permit open opposition. But it is a significant challenge. First the election debacle. Not surprisingly, there are significant misgivings within the party over the dreadful result it achieved in the presidential election. The party's candidate Liadh Ní Riada won just 6 per cent of the vote, less than half the party's 2016 general election support. The expectation at leadership level that she would pocket the party's 15 per cent base and win enough extra votes to bring her over 20 per cent was badly misjudged, and the execution of the campaign was poor. She began talking about a united Ireland, and ended talking about fighting austerity – and neither message remotely connected with the voters. After every election, Sinn Féin conducts what I understand is a pretty frank postmortem to ascertain lessons from the campaign. Though it is always difficult to see inside the party (especially at times of stress) we can presume this process is taking place at the moment. It is unlikely to be a comfortable one for McDonald and her leadership team.

### **Extradition warrant**

Normally in such circumstances, the party hunkers down and reassures its base. Last week, with the arrest on an extradition warrant of John Downey, saw the party do just that – several TDs turned up at the court hearing to support the former IRA man, who faces charges in the North in relation to the killing of two British soldiers in 1972. This was a message to the grassroots: we stand by our people, no matter what. It will reassure the footsoldiers – but it makes it harder for the McDonald project of reaching out to the middle-class swing voters who have time for her, but not for her party's past. Being an effective leader requires additional skills and judgment not required of

ordinary TDs. McDonald is an able parliamentary and media performer, quick on her feet, unruffled under fire and possessed of a sharp tongue. But her tendency to flog every minor political controversy or story of the day for political advantage undermines her ability to land real political hits on big issues. After all, if everything is a crisis, nothing is a crisis.

For one example, her judgment when the cervical screening controversy first broke was seriously questionable. She repeatedly suggested that the HSE's failure to inform women about their missed smears had retarded or impeded their treatment, with possibly fatal results. This was utterly untrue, but in the febrile atmosphere of the time she got away with it.

A more serious challenge for her will be the unravelling of the coalition strategy in the face of Brexit. McDonald's political strategy is to make Sinn Féin available as a coalition partner for either Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil after the next election – on the basis that Fianna Fáil (probably the smaller party) will not want a repeat of the current confidence-and-supply arrangement in the likely event of another hung Dáil. Coalition in Dublin would be saleable to the party grassroots only if the move advanced its united Ireland agenda. So the price for Sinn Féin's support for a Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil taoiseach would be a White Paper on Irish unity within a year or two of taking office, and probably McDon-

ald herself as minister for foreign affairs to promote that process. With Sinn Féin in Government in Dublin, and soon afterwards, if not before, in government in Stormont as well, Sinn Féin ministers would embark on unprecedented formal and informal North-South co-operation. But in a post-Brexit world, with unionist nerves on a hair trigger, would Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil really bring Sinn Féin into government?

Perhaps they would. The prospect of power can overcome a lot of scruples. But senior figures in both parties tell me: absolutely not. There is reason to think they may not be bluffing: Micheál Martin has already demonstrated a willingness to forgo office. Fine Gael's cultural resist-

ance to Sinn Féin remains immense. Michael McGrath and Paschal Donohoe talk a lot about the virtues of the responsible centre of politics. Senior people in both parties believe that turbocharging the united Ireland agenda at government level would risk a dangerous alienation of unionists during a time of instability and uncertainty.

#### **Responsibilities in North**

At the same time as her strategy is unravelling, McDonald stands accused – along with the DUP – of ducking the responsibilities of office in the North. Whatever Sinn Féin’s scruples over the renewable-heat incentive controversy, and its concerns over same-sex marriage and an Irish language Act, the continuing refusal to form an administration that would give the North a voice is like refusing to put on a life jacket when the ship is sinking because you don’t like the colour.

The North is at the very centre of the process, yet it remains without a voice – not because its politicians have been deliberately excluded from the process, but because they cannot agree with one another. They are behaving like children, content to let the adults in Dublin, London and Brussels decide what is best for them, rather than taking responsibility for their own actions, taking control of their own future. But they are not children. They are adults, with adult responsibilities. They should live up to them.

# Pat Leahy

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