

NEW MASSES: IRELAND AND ARMENIA

In this number, NLR's 'New Masses, New Media' series examines the character of the recent protests in Armenia and Ireland, both sparked by price hikes for basic goods: electricity in one case, water in the other. Comparable in population—4.5m and 3m, respectively—Ireland as a whole is three times the size of Armenia. Historically, both have been shaped by their location between two imperial powers: Britain and America, Turkey and Russia. If there is an eerie parallel in the numbers estimated to have perished in the Irish Famine and the Armenian Genocide—between 800,000 and a million—the deliberately exterminationist policies of the Young Turks are of a different order of political and moral malignity to the laissez-faire arrogance of English colonialism. A mark of these dark pasts, in both cases the diaspora significantly outweighs the domestic population. In recent times, both countries have figured on the margin of larger economic unions, the EU and CIS; as a result, their trajectories in the 1990s were diametrically opposed. Armenia had been a high-end industrial hub within the Soviet Union, specializing in machine goods and electronic products. Already hit by the 1988 earthquake, its economy suffered one of the sharpest contractions of the former USSR as industrial disruption was exacerbated by war and blockade. From \$2.25bn in 1990, Armenian GDP dropped to \$1.2bn in 1993; it did not recover to its Soviet-era level until 2002. By that time, the population had fallen by 15 per cent, from 3.54m in 1990 to barely 3m; by 2013 it was down to 2.97m. The construction sector, chiefly driven by foreign investment and remittances from the diaspora—conservative estimates put this at 7m, the largest contingent in Russia, the wealthiest and best-organized in Los Angeles—has since become the main engine of growth, also nourishing a large shadow economy; privatizations have put key assets, including electricity generation and R&D, in Russian hands. Since 2014, Armenian exports to Russia have been hit by the tumbling rouble, which in turn has weakened the dram. Ireland, meanwhile, which had benefited from European Community structural and agricultural funds from 1973, saw its economy take off in the early 1990s as the Republic became the low-tax destination of choice in the EU for American multinationals. Irish GDP doubled from 1990–99, then tripled again from 2000–07, as the credit-fuelled construction boom took hold. Since the crash, its citizens have been forced to shoulder a bank bailout worth around 37 per cent of GDP through sharp public-spending cuts. Below, Zhanna Andreasyan, Georgi Derluguian and Daniel Finn discuss the nature of the protests and their potential outcomes.

DANIEL FINN

WATER WARS IN IRELAND

IRELAND'S POLITICAL CLASS has spent the past few years assuring its counterparts in the rest of Europe that no burden is too great for the local population to bear. In 2009, Finance Minister Brian Lenihan bragged about 'our capacity to take pain . . . in France you would have riots if you tried to do this.'¹ Lenihan's Fianna Fáil party may have been wiped out at the 2011 general election, but the new Fine Gael-Labour government kept on whistling the same tune. However deep the cuts might be, there was no danger of civil unrest: that simply wasn't the Irish way. Troika officials mingled the barbs directed at turbulent Greeks with half-ingratiating, half-contemptuous remarks about the solid, dependable Irish, who would do as they were told and ask for nothing in return. The eruption of autumn 2014, which saw huge numbers mobilizing in a struggle against water charges, took these complacent voices entirely by surprise. The emergence of a real anti-austerity movement, making use of a wide range of tactics, from electoral campaigns to civil disobedience, and putting down roots in working-class neighbourhoods all over the state, came just as talk of an Irish recovery was reaching fever-pitch. How can we explain this apparent paradox, and what impact might this sudden upsurge of protest have in the long run?

The Republic of Ireland was being held up as a model to the rest of the Eurozone at a time when its economy was still mired in recession. Over the past year, however, such talk has become more insistent, as the latest figures appear to give substance to a comforting morality tale. The Irish people sinned ('we all partied', as Brian Lenihan put it); they did their penance, swallowing the Troika's harsh medicine; and now the rewards are beginning to materialize. The headline figures for GDP and GNP that are

cited to back up this argument require careful scrutiny, however. US corporations use Ireland as a tax haven, moving vast sums in and out of the country: in 2012, service-related exports from such companies amounted to €91 billion, but almost €40 billion of that was accounted for by transfer pricing.² Insofar as there has been real growth in the Irish economy, it certainly cannot be attributed to greater compliance with Troika dictates. The Fine Gael Finance Minister Michael Noonan has repeated the mantra ‘Ireland is not Greece’ at every possible opportunity over the past four years. Noonan’s boorish chauvinism obscures the grain of an important truth, for the structures of the two economies are radically different. Ireland has long had one of the most open, export-reliant economies in Europe, and its efforts to attract foreign investment have borne fruit irrespective of Troika-mandated austerity.³ Ireland is part of the Atlantic region, sharing a language with Britain and the US, and benefits from growth in those much larger states; Greece enjoys no such advantages.

In any case, we have to look beyond questionable GDP statistics to see whether things have actually been getting better for the majority of Irish citizens. Unemployment, one of the few trustworthy benchmarks, has fallen since it reached a peak of 15 per cent in 2012: by the summer of 2015, the figure was a little under 10 per cent. Mass emigration has kept the dole queues down, with almost 475,000 people having left the country between 2008 and 2014 (the total labour force in 2014 was a little over 2 million). Ireland swapped the highest net immigration levels in Europe for its highest rate of emigration after the crash, overtaking Kosovo and the Baltic states. 17.5 per cent of Irish-born people over the age of fifteen now live abroad—the highest proportion in the OECD, greater even than Mexico’s; without this safety-valve, unemployment would have been close to Spanish or Greek levels. But there has been some genuine relief on this front for those who remained behind.

¹ Anne Lucey, ‘Europe “amazed” at steps taken in budget—Lenihan’, *Irish Times*, 27 April 2009. Thanks to Shane Fitzgerald for his comments on this article.

² Aidan Regan, ‘What Explains Ireland’s Fragile Recovery from the Crisis? The Politics of Comparative Institutional Advantage’, *CESifo Forum*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2014; Michael Taft, ‘What is going on in the Irish economy?’, *Irish Left Review*, 9 October 2014. As Taft notes, goods that are made in and sold from other countries, never touching Irish soil, are nonetheless added to the state’s export figures as long as they are produced by an ‘Irish entity’. In the first half of 2014, this statistical quirk added almost €3 billion to the balance of payments: more than the growth in GDP during the same period.

³ Regan, ‘What Explains Ireland’s Fragile Recovery from the Crisis?’.

Domestic consumption, on the other hand, actually fell in relative terms—from 87 per cent of the EU-15 average in 2013 to 85 per cent the following year—while registering a very slight increase overall.⁴ So far, there has been a partial and tentative recovery, whose benefits have not been felt by much of the Irish population.

No bondholder left behind

All talk of ‘recovery’ must, of course, be set against the backdrop of what came before. From 2008 onwards, the Irish state was saddled with the most expensive bank bailout in European history. The infamous, now-defunct Anglo Irish Bank chalked up losses of €35 billion; AIB was not far behind, with a €28-billion hole in its finances (Irish GDP in 2014 was a little over €180 billion).⁵ The greater part of this burden was simply passed on to Irish citizens. ECB figures released in April 2015 show that Ireland’s share of the European banking crisis was grossly disproportionate: while the average cost of bank bailouts across the Eurozone was 5 per cent of GDP, in Ireland it was 37.3 per cent.⁶ Most of that money will never be recovered, having been spent on toxic assets and bank recapitalization. Under severe pressure from the European Central Bank, and from the US Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner, Dublin has continued to make regular multi-billion euro payments to foreign bondholders who invested money in Irish banks on the strength of hocus-pocus assessments by the ratings agencies (and whose identities have never been publicly disclosed). Interest payments on the national debt will rise to €9.2 billion in 2016—one-fifth of all tax revenue—and an additional payment of €5.7 billion annually will be needed to bring Ireland into line with the EU’s fiscal compact when that comes into effect.⁷

To pay for this crushing burden, deep cuts in public spending were imposed, just as unemployment was beginning to soar, in a country

⁴ Michael Taft, ‘Irish living standards fall further behind Europe’, *Irish Left Review*, 1 July 2015.

⁵ Richard Curran, ‘The most expensive bank bailout ever’, *Sunday Business Post*, 25 April 2012.

⁶ Greece came second, with 25 per cent; for Germany, the figure was a little over 10 per cent; for Britain, with its swollen financial sector, less than 7 per cent: David Miliken, ‘Ireland and Greece unlikely to recoup vast bank bailout costs—ECB’, *Reuters*, 9 April 2015.

⁷ TASC, *Budget 2015 Commentary: A Chance to Address Ireland’s Inequality Problem*, Dublin 2014, p. 24.

already graced with the second-highest levels of poverty and inequality in the developed world. From 2008 to 2014, austerity budgets took €30 billion out of the national economy: two-thirds of that figure came from spending cuts. Every budget was talked up by government ministers as the last of its kind before Ireland ‘turned the corner’, only to be followed by further cuts in social expenditure. The official deprivation rate shot up from less than 12 per cent in 2007 to 30.5 per cent in 2013.⁸ These headline figures cannot fully convey the impact of the recession on a society under deep strain. Behind every cut stands another group of people who rely upon benefits for much or all of their income; each ‘belt-tightening’ exercise in the public sector tightens the screws on those who cannot afford to go private.

Labour’s way

The first stage of the recession was presided over by Fianna Fáil, which paid the electoral price, plunging from 41 per cent of the vote in 2007 to 17 per cent four years later. The 2011 election brought huge gains for Fine Gael and Labour, who went on to form a coalition government with Enda Kenny as prime minister. Both parties had strongly criticized the bank bailout and pledged to impose losses on bondholders. Labour in particular called for a sharp break with the policies of the Cowen government, and with the programme imposed by the Troika at the end of 2010; ‘it’s Labour’s way or Frankfurt’s way’ became the most memorable sound-bite of the campaign. This rhetoric melted away like snow in the sun once the election was over.

There was indeed a break with Fianna Fáil’s style of crisis management, though not the one promised by Labour: after 2011, economic policy became much more regressive. Up to that point, austerity budgets had taken proportionately more from the top layers of the income scale than from those at or near the bottom. Under Fine Gael and Labour, the trend was reversed: in successive budgets from 2012 to 2014, those on the lowest incomes came out worst.⁹ This was accompanied by

⁸ NERI, *Quarterly Economic Facts: Spring 2015*, p. 85.

⁹ Eoin Ó Broin, ‘The gap between rich and poor is widening, thanks to this government’, *The Journal*, 25 February 2015. The figures come from the state-funded Economic and Social Research Institute, which never strays far from conventional wisdom.

victim-blaming rhetoric directed against single mothers and the unemployed, with Labour cabinet ministers showing particular gusto on this front, and gestures of national abasement that would turn the strongest stomach (Kenny has sometimes allowed European leaders to pat him literally as well as figuratively on the head). The 2015 ‘post-austerity’ budget offered income gains to the top 40 per cent of households—the richest 10 per cent benefited the most—but continued losses for the remaining 60 per cent.¹⁰ Kenny’s government has declared its intention to prioritize the comfortable classes when resources become available, dressing up a cut in the top rate of income tax as much-needed relief for an imaginary ‘squeezed middle’.¹¹ Meanwhile, a health service starved of investment and struggling to cope after losing more than a tenth of its staff has been told to prune another quarter of a billion euros from its budget.¹² The Labour leader and social welfare minister Joan Burton has lately begun to attend the opening of food banks in ebullient form, with no apparent sense of shame or irony.

There was thus every reason for Ireland’s squeezed majority to protest. A survey of those involved in the movement against water charges revealed some of the material desperation after years of austerity that rarely gets a public hearing:

There are days I don’t eat so that I can pay the bills and my kids don’t realize that we haven’t got money to buy stuff.

I work, my husband works and we can’t give any more; I can’t imagine how people who don’t work will manage.

I have no more money to give, I’m on the brink.

My 65-year-old father has to use a food bank and cannot afford to heat his house. We’ve had enough.¹³

¹⁰ Ó Broin, ‘The gap between rich and poor’.

¹¹ Stephen Collins and Eoin Burke Kennedy, ‘Taoiseach plans more tax cuts for middle [sic] earners’, *Irish Times*, 28 November 2014. 65 per cent of income-tax payers are not affected by the top rate at all.

¹² Paul Cullen, ‘Health must cut €230m in 2015 despite modest funding boost’, *Irish Times*, 27 November 2014.

¹³ Rory Hearne, *The Irish Water War, Austerity and the ‘Risen People’*, Department of Geography, Maynooth University, April 2015, p. 10.

Incessant talk of recovery may have actually contributed to the explosion. Irish citizens were warned repeatedly from 2008 onwards that the state was facing an emergency without precedent in its history: rocking the boat might capsize it altogether. On being told that the worst phase of the crisis was now over, those who had borne its brunt were bound to feel more confident in demanding relief.

Liquid assets

If the potential was there for an outbreak by the autumn of 2014, why did water charges come to be its focal point? A scheme to impose user fees for household water consumption had been on the books for several years: the Memorandum of Understanding agreed with the IMF in 2010 included a pledge to ‘move towards full cost-recovery in the provision of water services’, with responsibility for water transferred from local authorities to a national utility.¹⁴ The Kenny government duly established Irish Water in 2013 and prepared to introduce charges by the end of the following year. From the coalition’s point of view, the idea had several points in its favour. In the short term, it would produce a new revenue stream; further down the line, it would transform a public asset into a profit-making firm that could be sold off to private interests. Most urgently perhaps, setting up Irish Water as a formally independent company would allow them to shave a few points off the national debt, as its borrowings would not be kept on the state’s books.

The project had the disadvantage, however, of striking a broad range of people simultaneously, instead of picking them off one by one: tenants and home-owners, private- and public-sector workers, the unemployed and those still in work. Moreover, there was a history of protest against ‘double taxation’ going back more than two decades. A previous campaign against water charges in the late 80s and early 90s, spearheaded by the radical left, had forced their abolition. Trotskyist MP Joe Higgins of the Socialist Party, often referred to as a one-man parliamentary opposition during the boom years, was first elected to the Dáil in 1997 on the strength of his role in that campaign. The argument that local services should be paid for by progressive taxation, not user fees, was deployed again in 2003–04, when a struggle against

¹⁴ IMF, ‘Ireland: Letter of Intent, Memorandum of Economic and Financial Policies, and Technical Memorandum of Understanding’, 3 December 2010, pp. 8, 30.

bin charges that mobilized working-class communities across Dublin reached its peak with the jailing of several activists (including Higgins and other prominent leftists).¹⁵ The bin-tax struggle ended in defeat, but the experience was a valuable one for those at its sharp end. Having seen waivers for low-income households gradually withdrawn once the heat was off, they were unlikely to set much store by assurances from Irish Water that its charges would be capped. The privatization of waste collection in Dublin over the past decade, resulting in a chaotic service for residents and eroded working conditions for staff, supplied another useful lesson. Some of the community groups most active in the campaign against water charges had cut their teeth blockading scab drivers when the Greyhound bin company locked out its unionized workers in early 2014.

Irish Water also managed to condense much of the anger at corrupt ties between political and business elites in the wake of the crash, when a company owned by the state's wealthiest citizen, Denis O'Brien, was awarded a contract to install water meters by the Fine Gael environment minister Phil Hogan (Hogan, a thoroughly unpleasant, bovine mediocrity, even by the standards of his party, has since moved to Brussels as Ireland's EU commissioner). O'Brien's leg-up in the world of business came from his acquisition of a mobile-phone licence in the late 90s: the Moriarty tribunal later found that the Fine Gael politician responsible for overseeing the tendering process, Michael Lowry, had received large cash payments from O'Brien, and condemned his 'venal abuse of office'. O'Brien has gone on to become the dominant player in Ireland's private media, controlling two national radio stations and a stable of newspapers. Not content with this commanding position, the businessman has repeatedly taken legal action against journalists and politicians who presume to criticize his affairs. Siteserv, the company installing water meters, passed into O'Brien's hands in 2012; as part of the deal, the state-owned Irish Bank Resolution Corporation—formerly Anglo Irish Bank—wrote off €110m of its €150m debt.

There were a few warning signs in the early months of 2014. Reports that Irish Water planned to spend €85 million on consultant fees generated the first bout of controversy about corporate greed at the start of the year, and left and independent candidates made opposition to the charges a

¹⁵ Colm Breathnach, 'The Battle of the Bins', *Frontline*, vol. 1, no. 12, 2004.

key plank of their campaigns during the local and European elections in May (the Socialist Party added ‘Stop the Water Tax’ to its name on the ballot paper). Local protests against the installation of water meters had already begun in a number of towns when a broad campaigning front, Right 2 Water, was launched in September, with support from Sinn Féin, the socialist left and a number of trade unions. Right 2 Water built on the foundations laid by an earlier campaign against a flat tax on homeowners, which had organized some big protests in 2011–12 before the government opted to deduct the charge directly from salaries, heading off the threat of mass non-payment. The most important union backing came from MANDATE, which organizes retail workers, and the Irish section of UNITE. Both have struck a dissenting profile within the Irish Congress of Trade Unions over the past decade, speaking up against corporatist ‘social partnership’ deals. This marks them out from the two most important ICTU affiliates, SIPTU and IMPACT, whose leadership teams stand very close to the Labour Party and have done their best to keep things locked down on its behalf since 2011. Right 2 Water was the first major attempt by MANDATE and UNITE to organize protests against government policy outside the ICTU framework; MANDATE’s general secretary John Douglas and the UNITE organizer Brendan Ogle would become prominent spokesmen for the campaign.

Take-off

The coalition of forces behind the water charges movement had real potential, but even the most optimistic left-wing activists were caught unawares when the campaign of protest suddenly took flight in the autumn of 2014. A national march in October brought more than 100,000 people onto the streets of Dublin—the equivalent of a million-strong demonstration in Spain—as the first deadline for households to register with Irish Water approached; the organizers had been expecting 20,000 at most. It was followed by a day of action on November 1st, with simultaneous protests all over the country mobilizing well over 200,000. An October by-election in the Dublin South West constituency was dominated by the issue, as Sinn Féin and the Socialist Party competed to offer the most unyielding opposition to the charges. Their candidates won 57.5 per cent of the vote between them, with the Socialist Party edging ahead on transfers; the two government parties managed a little over 17 per cent, down from 64 per cent in the last general election (Labour took the biggest hit). Alarmed by the strength of the protests, the Kenny government made a number of

concessions, capping the charges until 2018 and offering a €100 bribe (packaged as a ‘conservation grant’) to anyone who registered their details with Irish Water. The first of several deadlines was allowed to pass while ministers figured out what to do. In a poll for the *Irish Times* conducted at the beginning of December, less than half of households declared their intention to pay the charges, and a third big march on December 10th racked up the pressure even further.¹⁶

Alongside the most high-profile interventions, there was a more diffuse mobilization against the charges in working-class neighbourhoods, where local groups, often organized through social media, held protests and sought to prevent the installation of water meters by occupying the space in front of people’s homes. A Facebook search will reveal dozens of such groups, with some variation on ‘X against water charges’ or ‘Y says no’ as their handle, scattered throughout the larger cities and regional towns such as Dundalk and Cobh.¹⁷ The activists behind these community-based networks typically have no background in the traditional left milieu, and have sometimes expressed vocal suspicion of the established political parties in the campaign. One by-product of the crisis in Ireland has been intense distrust of ‘politicians’ as such—even those who have long been trenchant critics of the conservative establishment.¹⁸ The local activist groups have also tended to work more or less autonomously from the Right 2 Water steering committee, while mobilizing in support of the national protest marches called by Right 2 Water.

An academic survey conducted at the beginning of 2015 provided the first real glimpse of opinion among supporters of the campaign.¹⁹ The study was based on an online questionnaire, filled out by 2,500 people, which was likely to have attracted the most highly motivated activists; if read with that qualification in mind, it offers some useful insights into the sentiment behind the protests. 45 per cent of respondents came from Dublin, with a strong bias towards working-class areas like Tallaght,

¹⁶ Stephen Collins, ‘Less than half of households intend to pay water charge’, *Irish Times*, 5 December 2014.

¹⁷ Hearne, *Irish Water War*.

¹⁸ Ronan Burtenshaw, ‘The Politics of Disillusionment’, *Village*, June 2015. One striking contribution to the protests from this quarter has been the flying of Greek flags as a rebuke to the Kenny government’s parochial mentality.

¹⁹ Hearne, *Irish Water War*.

Inchicore and Crumlin; 61 per cent were between 30 and 50 years of age, and just over half were in full-time employment. Asked to give their reason for protesting, the majority (60 per cent) agreed that ‘austerity has gone too far’; opposition to water privatization was also frequently cited as a motivating factor. 92 per cent said that they had no intention of paying the charges. The vast majority relied on social media for information about the campaign, and expressed strong distrust of traditional media outlets. Government spokesmen may have convinced themselves that opposition to water charges stemmed exclusively from ‘professional protesters’ (also known as ‘the usual suspects’), but the survey findings told a different story: 55 per cent had never taken part in a demonstration before. 78 per cent now believed that the most effective way to secure political change was through protesting.²⁰ The survey also gave a sense of the raw anger directed towards the government parties. 35 per cent had voted for Labour in 2011, 16 per cent for Fine Gael; now, more than 80 per cent declared their intention of voting for Sinn Féin, the socialist groups or left-independents. Labour in particular has paid the price for its duplicity, and was singled out for attack. The party’s undisguised contempt for the working-class voters who rallied behind its standard in 2011 is now thoroughly reciprocated.²¹

The Jobstown massacre

Predictably, the backlash against the campaign was not long in coming. The first clumsy attempts to smear the protesters sailed wide of the target. Labour’s Joan Burton thought she could score a telling point by observing that many of those taking part in the protests had ‘expensive phones’—which is to say, mobile phones with built-in cameras, the only kind now on sale. The comment merely unleashed a torrent of derision. Burton and her supporters found a more robust pretext in November 2014 when she visited the south Dublin area of Jobstown—the kind of working-class district where, Burton had previously claimed, unemployment was a ‘lifestyle choice’ for young people—in search of

²⁰ Just 28 per cent reckoned that contacting a local MP or councillor was an effective way to bring about change. Irish media commentators have frequently bemoaned the clientelism of the state’s political culture, for which they hold the electorate responsible; curiously, there was no sign of such pundits welcoming this shift in popular attitudes away from passive dependence on representatives who hand down favours from above.

²¹ See Hearne, *Irish Water War*, p. 23 for a sample of such views.

a photo opportunity. Residents organized a demonstration, and asked the recently elected Socialist Party MP, Paul Murphy, for his support; they blocked the minister's car with a sit-down protest, and one local wit threw a water balloon in the car's general direction. With a police escort in tow, Burton was never in the slightest danger, and the fracas would barely have rated a mention in Greece or Spain. Long after the minister had left the area, riot police moved in for a needless but photogenic confrontation with some teenagers, and a solitary brick was thrown, much to the delight of the press pack.

The hysteria triggered by this minor incident would have sufficed to power a wind turbine for several days. The most surpassingly idiotic comment came from a Fine Gael MP who suggested that an 'ISIS-type situation' might follow if such things were allowed to happen, although he faced strong competition from a newspaper columnist who believed that the throwing of water balloons was the first step towards the Gulag. Much of the venom was directed against Paul Murphy, who was evidently the wicked ringleader behind the whole affair, and middle-class to boot: Murphy's refusal to condemn the protesters inspired such fury in certain media pundits that many began to fear for their health.²² In February 2015, the Gardaí, Ireland's police force, arrested Murphy and other left activists in pre-dawn raids that were spread out over a fortnight to maximize their public impact, also scooping up a batch of teenagers who had been at the protest. For those who find such things persuasive, the arrests were enough to bestow a taint of criminality on the movement, and it might have been considered prudent to let the matter rest there, but the state prosecutor followed through in September with a baffling array of charges for no fewer than 23 of those present, including false imprisonment, violent disorder and criminal damage. The trials to come will generate more heat and sharply polarize opinion, with unpredictable consequences for a government that may come to wish the relevant files had been left to gather dust.

The protest campaign has shone an unflattering light on the Gardaí, a force that had hitherto managed to cling on to an unwarranted reputation

²² Daniel McConnell, 'Murphy's disgraceful belated U-turn on Tallaght thuggery', *Sunday Independent*, 23 November 2014. The supposed 'U-turn' was a product of the journalist's imagination. A front-page splash in the *Daily Mail's* Irish edition attacking Murphy and his fellow MP Ruth Coppinger managed to use the word 'mob' four times in five sentences.

for benign, consensual policing. The tactics it used in support of Shell's gas project in Mayo might have been so egregious that a Dublin-based human-rights organization felt obliged to send observers and compile a report of the kind usually reserved for countries like Mexico or Nigeria.²³ But in that case, the victims belonged to an isolated rural community and could be stigmatized as thugs and terrorists with the help of a compliant media. Deploying the same methods right across the country poses a serious problem for the force's standing. A slow-burning corruption scandal has added to the trouble: so far the Garda commissioner and a Fine Gael justice minister have had to resign after trying to smear police whistle-blowers and a batch of left-wing and independent MPs who publicized their allegations. By Mediterranean standards (or those of London's Met) this may seem like small-time crookery, but having managed to remain 'above politics' for so long, the Gardaí appear genuinely bewildered at finding themselves under scrutiny. Candidates for senior positions in the force now report being quizzed about 'left-wing political extremism' during interviews.²⁴ If the state ramps up its effort to break the water-charges movement, things will only get worse for its enforcers on the ground.

Right 2 Power?

The focus then shifted for several months to tactical differences within Right 2 Water. Sinn Féin and the trade unions were reluctant to call explicitly for non-payment of the charges; the radical left was much less inhibited, as were many of the local campaign groups. The question of non-payment was the main dividing line between Sinn Féin and the Socialist Party in the Dublin South West by-election, and contributed greatly to Sinn Féin's surprising defeat in one of its established strongholds. In early 2015, some of the trade-union officials involved in the campaign began pushing heavily for a shift towards the electoral stage. Their goal was to put forward a slate of candidates in the upcoming general election, and there was some rather breathless talk of Ireland's first left-wing government taking power on the back of the protests. Right 2

²³ Front Line Defenders, *Breakdown of Trust: A Report on the Corrib Gas Dispute*, Dublin 2010.

²⁴ Mary Carolan, 'Garda "taken aback" at political questions in job interview', *Irish Times*, 23 April 2015.

Water organized a conference of invited delegates in June 2015 to discuss a draft programme that reached beyond the water question to cover housing, employment, health care, education and parliamentary reform.²⁵

This electoral turn was inspired by the dramatic political shifts evident since the last general election. In the 2014 European poll, support for Sinn Féin, independents and two small left parties reached 42.6 per cent, while the combined score for Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Labour dipped below 50 per cent—unthinkable just a few years ago. Labour's vote has collapsed; Fianna Fáil has recovered some of the ground lost in 2011, but is still a shadow of the party it once was. A loosely defined 'anti-establishment' bloc, comprised of Sinn Féin, the radical left and independents of varying hue, has been consistently backed by 40–50 per cent of the electorate in polls. But when that bloc is broken down into its component parts, things become much more complicated. Sinn Féin has been the main beneficiary of Labour's collapse, standing on a clear anti-austerity platform, but is strongly distrusted by the socialist groups, and with good cause: best described as a left-nationalist party which is more nationalist than left, Sinn Féin is perfectly capable of shifting towards the centre ground if and when it deems that expedient. For its part, the radical left has thus far been unable to overcome internal divisions so that it can present a coherent platform—although a joint slate for the next general election has recently been announced.

As for the independent MPs, when we exclude so-called 'gene-pool' independents (defectors from Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael), we can find a very broad range of progressive opinion, from quasi-Marxist to vaguely social-democratic. The 'independent' brand is popular with the electorate, reflecting a widespread aversion to conventional politics, and the Irish voting system gives non-party candidates plenty of room to win seats (there is no minimum national threshold to enter parliament, and each constituency has several seats in play). But this fragmentation of dissent will ultimately make it harder to displace the conservative parties. Overall, Irish politics increasingly corresponds to a pattern identified by Peter Mair in one of his final essays, when he spoke of 'a growing divide in European party systems between parties which claim

²⁵ Right 2 Water, 'Policy Principles for a Progressive Irish Government', available online.

to represent, but don't deliver, and those which deliver, but are no longer seen to represent'.²⁶

The question of political alliances was not addressed directly by Right 2 Water's proposal; indeed, the whole electoral strategy underpinning it remains quite nebulous. For those who insisted that a 'progressive government' was almost within reach, the opinion polls had a clear message: even if Sinn Féin, the hard-left groups and progressive independents did better than expected, and could agree on a programme, they would still need support from one of the pro-Troika parties to put together a majority in parliament. Many on the radical left feared that this was precisely what the Right 2 Water leadership had in mind, and a joint statement argued for clarity on this point, ruling out any coalition with Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil or Labour. The radicals also called for an organized boycott of the water charges, with no let-up in campaigning this side of the general election, and warned that any break with austerity policies would bring a left government into direct conflict with the EU: the statement of principles should therefore include the willingness to break Eurozone rules if necessary, and keep unilateral debt cancellation on the table.²⁷ Steps were taken to organize a Non-Payment Network that would bring together advocates of a boycott, although the organizers stressed that they were not trying to displace Right 2 Water.²⁸

After a brief hiatus while these debates played themselves out, with no major demonstrations called by Right 2 Water for several months, the campaign was given a boost by two major setbacks for the government's strategy in July 2015. After months of stalling, Irish Water finally released its own carefully massaged figures, and was forced to admit

²⁶ 'In these systems, governing capacity and vocation becomes the property of one more or less closely bounded group of political parties . . . representation or expression, on the other hand, or the provision of voice to the people, when it doesn't move wholly outside the arena of electoral politics, becomes the property of a second group of parties, and it is these parties that constitute the new opposition. These latter parties are often characterized by a strong populist rhetoric. They rarely govern, and also downplay office-seeking motives.' Peter Mair, 'Bini Smaghi vs the Parties: Representative Government and Institutional Constraints', *EUI Working Papers*, RSCAS 2011/22.

²⁷ Paul Murphy et al, 'Principles for a Left Alternative', *Irish Left Review*, 28 May 2015.

²⁸ Norma Costello, 'Water charge groups clash over "left" party leadership', *Irish Examiner*, 30 May 2015.

that well over 50 per cent of households had still not paid the charges.²⁹ Politicians and newspaper columnists who had depicted the ‘refuseniks’ as a tiny, unrepresentative minority were left flummoxed, and those calling for non-payment as a central tactic found their hand strengthened. A second blow then came from an unlikely source, Eurostat, which batted away the government’s case for defining Irish Water as a private entity and insisted that its borrowings would have to be counted towards the national debt. At a stroke, this punctured one of the main arguments for imposing water charges in the first place. It may have been the alleged ‘conservation grant’ that did the most damage: no company on the receiving end of such largesse could truly be considered independent.³⁰ Kenny, Burton and their allies don’t mind appearing callous, but ham-fisted incompetence is a different matter. Another big Right 2 Water march at the end of the summer showed that there had been no decline in mobilization, for all the claims by government spokesmen that the movement was now on its last legs.

This leaves the ruling coalition in a fix, with an election due within months. They might well prefer to cancel the whole experiment and hope that the energy of the last year fizzles out with the main irritant removed. But this would bring its own problems, as Gene Kerrigan, the only journalist to have consistently supported the movement, recently noted: ‘Scrapping Irish Water before the election would be disastrous. They would appear weak, uncertain and panicky—when they most need to seem strong and authoritative.’³¹ The campaigners, on the other hand, will need to prepare for a horizon that stretches well past the upcoming vote, which is likely to deliver a Fine Gael–Fianna Fáil coalition as the most dependable pro-Troika arrangement. The movement against water charges has already given the lie to half-baked notions of the Irish people as inherently conservative or apathetic. Its next moves will be crucial for the future of Irish politics.

²⁹ Fíach Kelly, ‘Irish Water collects less than half of water charges owed’, *Irish Times*, 15 July 2015.

³⁰ Cliff Taylor, ‘Eurostat says State control over Irish Water “exceptional”’, *Irish Times*, 30 July 2015.

³¹ Gene Kerrigan, ‘They’re losing the game but they have to fight on’, *Sunday Independent*, 19 July 2015.