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RESILIENCE AND RENEWAL:
THE EVOLUTION
AND FUTURE PROSPECTS OF
THE IRISH LABOUR PARTY

Barry Colfer



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Editors:

A. Schieder, L. Andor, S. Obrecht, A. Skrzypek

FEPS project coordinators:

A. Skrzypek, C. Guedes, I. Vijverberg

English language editor:

R. Cowie

Design, layout and printing:

Oficyna Wydawnicza ASPRA-JR

Logo and cover design:

V. De Wolf

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 **Renner**Institut



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Few words from the Editors

The Next Left Country Case Studies have become a well-established publication series in the FEPS and Karl Renner Institut Next Left Research Programme, which is entering its 17th year. This extraordinary collection of books is designed to provide readers with answers to recurring questions, including the following: *How are the other (sister) parties doing? What are the best examples that could be shared from their respective practices? Does their current situation result from a long-term process or just an electoral blip?* These and many other questions are covered in the volumes, which are intentionally kept short and remain focused on social democratic parties and the specificities of the respective national contexts in which they operate. Although they are crafted with a mission to focus on respective parties, they also provide incredibly valuable material that can enable comparative studies, as an innovative assemblage that fills a noticeable void within the world of think tanks and contemporary academic writings. As such, they are relevant contributions for political scientists interested in party systems and in studies of contemporary political thought, as well as those who wish to gain a more nuanced understanding of the connection between European processes and specific national political contexts.

Consequently, diving into diverse developments found within the books' pages, meeting the fascinating personalities who have shaped the movements' history and reading about their ideas – many

of which have become universal characteristics of modern politics – is an enthralling and enriching experience. It helps the reader to grasp subsequent chapters of the respective parties' history, the role they played internationally and why –in certain moments and from certain aspects – they may have been so influential nationally and internationally. And with this ambition in mind, the brand-new book on *Resilience and Renewal: The Evolution and the Future Prospects of the Irish Labour Party* by Dr Barry Colfer, Director of Research at the Institute of International and European Affairs, was written and is now proudly presented to the readership.

What makes the volume a must-read, especially amid the current global political turmoil, is that the author, who has been a scholar at the University of Cambridge and at the European Union Institute in Florence, dexterously depicts the Irish Labour Party (ILP) as a persistently mighty stakeholder in a unique political and socio-economic landscape. Ireland is a country with consequential transatlantic trade relations. It is a state with a complex history, especially with its neighbour, the UK, whereby interactions have become even more complicated in the post-Brexit era and with the question of the future of Northern Ireland re-emerging. It is a neutral state, which is part of the EU but remains outside of the Schengen Area. And it is an economy that has seen both periods of incredible boom (to illustrate, one can think of the time when it was named “a Celtic Tiger”) and times of astounding regression (exemplified by what occurred immediately after the financial crash of 2008). But against this backdrop, it is also a Republic with a political system that, as Colfer writes, has been relatively stable throughout the century and has persisted as a “two and a half” party system, even though it also has the highest proportion of independent candidates elected to parliament in the world. Thus, uncovering with Colfer how the ILP has persevered in its position as a key actor, on one hand, and discovering,

on the other hand, the reasons why it has never managed to become the largest party is a fascinating intellectual adventure indeed.

The author describes the origins of the ILP and the way it emerged from within the trade union movement, being shaped by such outstanding personalities as James Connolly, James Larken and William O'Brien. The party has been developing alongside a trajectory that has made it consistent, predictable and distinctive in its progressive nature. While unshaken regarding its core values, the party has evolved on some issues – moving from Eurosceptic towards pro-European, as well as embracing much of the civil liberties agenda towards the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. These developments are certainly not uncommon and can also be found within the respective histories of the other sister parties. But unlike many, the ILP – succeeding or losing in different elections – has never made it to the position of the majoritarian party. Colfer believes that this remains connected to its traditions and origins, whereby the legacy of the Civil War still seems to dominate Irish politics today. And this explains why Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been unfailingly at the helm, with Sinn Féin emerging as the third-strongest party around the year 2020.

This explanation refers to the numerical power of the ILP, although it should not be seen as indicative of the influence that the ILP has nevertheless been able to secure. While the party may have solidified its image as “always a minority party”, it served as a junior partner in seven governmental coalitions in the previous century, leaving a proud legacy of many labour and social reforms. Colfer shows this, incredibly cleverly, as he meticulously enumerates relevant examples. He also reaffirms that such a positioning is not an easy one. But what makes his deliberations particularly insightful is his consideration that it has been, for the ILP – as it would be for any party – a tough choice to enter

a coalition with a larger and more dominant one. Because, in case of misfortunes, it risks being blamed for them, paradoxically much more than the party in charge, as was the case for the ILP in the times of post-crisis austerity. At the same time, he points out that the alternative would be to stay in opposition and criticise without much or even no influence. This leads to a vital question that many politicians ask themselves nowadays: *what are the criteria that define effective political delivery and the scope of essential political responsibility that every serious democratic party should find itself compelled to take on?*

Finally, Colfer doesn't just report, analyse and diagnose. He goes beyond that – using the outcomes of his scrupulous research to refer to the circumstances at hand, and to point to the strategic options that the ILP has now and for the future. On one hand, as the volume's title suggests, the ILP has proven resilient and capable of grand returns, particularly as manifested in the last elections. Here, the book also carefully extracts what has made Ivana Bacik's project as successful as it has been thus far. But, on the other hand, the party is facing a consolidated competitor on the left (Irish Social Democratic Party), and it operates in a particular moment in time, which does not appear favourable for progressives worldwide. Not to mention that Ireland is not immune to protest votes, even if they now translate to support for independents and not for one particular contesting party. But this is what can turn perilous, especially if the Irish economy becomes volatile again, while, at the same time, means are already lacking for much-needed upgrades and modernisation of the social model. As Colfer writes, Ireland is the only EU member state with no universal primary free healthcare, the lowest-funded childcare and Dublin is one of the most expensive places to live when it comes to housing. But while it may seem like an unprecedented set of challenges altogether, he underlines that, at the end of the day, it comes down to defining and

having the courage to make tough choices. Here, Colfer equips the reader to understand what could perhaps appear as audacious at first, but would be just an integral, authentic labour position. The task is not just to endure, but to empower and ensure social progress, especially in the times we are all currently living through.

1

Introduction: The uniqueness of social democracy in Ireland

1.1 Ireland's unusual political habitat

Public representatives in Ireland tend to maintain close ties with their constituencies and serve as both public representatives and public servants. Politicians are expected to help citizens to access and navigate elements of the state and to resolve issues related to a broad range of matters, including housing, health, education, business development, personal finances, public infrastructure and very much more. This is partly explained by the fact that Ireland uses proportional representation (PR) for voting in elections, with each voter having a single transferable vote (STV) within multi-seat constituencies to elect the Dáil's 174 TDs¹ and 949 local councillors across 31 local authority areas. This makes elected representatives vulnerable to the vagaries of local sentiment and individual successes and failures (or perceived successes and failures) while in office.

Many parliamentary careers start at the local level, and the engine room of political activity remains the local branch level. This connection to the local level is matched by the importance of the local party

organisation and volunteers to engage in canvassing, campaigning and public engagement to support a representative's chances of being elected or re-elected. These dynamics set the Irish political milieu aside from many of its peers, as even senior ministers are expected to dedicate considerable time and energy to local matters. These norms apply as much to Labour as they do to any party that is active in Irish politics. Labour has a strong tradition of organisation and activity across the country and has been traditionally strongest in Dublin and the surrounding counties, which make up the capital's commuter belt, as well as in the south of the country, which includes the urban settings of Cork, Limerick and Waterford.

Ireland's political landscape is also unique by European standards given the absence of a conventional left-right divide in the country's politics. Historically, Irish politics has been dominated by two centre-to-centre-right political parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. These parties originated on opposing sides of the Irish Civil War (1922-1923), which followed the country's War of Independence with Great Britain (1919-1921). This period of conflict resulted both in the creation of the modern Irish state and in the country's enduring political cleavage that originated not in economic or social ideologies but in differing perspectives related to the national question and to Irish independence. As a result, class-based politics, which typically defines the left-right divisions that have dominated in most other European countries over the past century and more, and which frames the context of social democratic parties, has never fully developed in Ireland – or at least not in the same way. This means that social democratic and socialist movements, including the Irish Labour Party, have played a different and smaller part in Irish politics and society compared to other European countries, at least when it comes to electoral success.

Indeed, unlike many other Western European countries, where social democratic parties became dominant political forces in the 20th century, the Irish Labour Party has never been the largest party in Ireland and has never led a government. However, despite this, as the conventional third party in Irish politics, the Irish Labour Party has had a disproportionate impact on Irish politics and society, which endures to this day, as we shall see. In keeping with convention, Labour's role in the Irish political landscape has been to champion workers' rights, social justice and progressive policies.

1.2 The Labour Party's role in Irish society

The Irish Labour Party was founded in 1912 by figures including James Connolly, James Larkin and William O'Brien (see Appendix A), who each remain major figures in Irish political history. As is typically the case, the early Labour Party was rooted in the country's trade union movement and was initially focused on representing the interests of the Irish working class.² Notably, unlike the likes of its near neighbour, the United Kingdom (UK), Ireland did not fully industrialise in the 19th century, and the trade union movement tended to attract members from those working in sectors including transportation, covering the docks and railways; printing services; and brewing and distilling.

The Irish Labour Party is a member of the Party of European Socialists (PES) and sits with the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D Group) in the European Parliament. The Irish electoral system is highly proportionate, with members of Dáil Éireann (the Irish lower house of parliament) being elected under a system of PR by STV, with members elected to multi-seat constituencies of three, four or five seats. The laws of Irish politics require parliamentarians to

maintain strong links with their constituencies, which can sometimes see the prioritisation of local issues to the detriment of matters of national importance. While this can sometimes be fairly labelled as clientelist, it also adds a vibrancy and vitality to Irish politics, and a strong bond between politicians and constituents.

As a small party, Labour has served as a junior partner in coalition governments on eight occasions since the foundation of the modern state in 1921. This role as a smaller, supporting player in successive coalition governments has naturally made it hard (or impossible) for the party to fully implement its agenda when in government, and to maintain a distinct and coherent political identity over time. Indeed, given the dominance of Fianna Fáil – a member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) Party and Renew Europe in the European Parliament – and Fine Gael – a member of the European People's Party – which together have led every Irish government since the foundation of the state, and which have both traditionally functioned as catch-all parties with broad support bases, Labour in government has always needed to compromise. This has led to disillusionment among supporters and has seen the party's electoral appeal wax and wane throughout history and decline starkly over the past decade, in particular, with the party being perceived by many as having failed to deliver on its mandate during its most recent, now infamous, period in government from 2011 to 2016.

The 2011 election ushered in a Fine Gael-Labour coalition and marks the high-water mark for Labour, with the party returning a record 37 seats. This government took office shortly after the country's financial bailout by the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the ECB European Central Bank (ECB) – hereinafter, "the Troika" – in 2010. This bailout was precipitated by a decision of the Fianna Fáil-Green Party coalition in 2008 to guarantee customer

deposits and eligible interbank liabilities of the country's six main banks to prevent a collapse of the banking system during the global financial crisis. This decision led to the Irish taxpayer being saddled with some €400 billion of bank liabilities and which ultimately led to the government requiring emergency financial assistance.³

In government, Labour was inevitably responsible for administering the terms of the country's bailout agreement, which included the introduction of swingeing austerity cuts across society. This stood at odds with many of the party's supporters, including many members, and, it should be said, with the values and priorities of fairness, equality and justice, as set out in the party's constitution.⁴ More than a decade on, the Labour Party is still living with the electoral consequences of this difficult period, which saw the party's support plummet from historic highs to near electoral insignificance in subsequent elections, as well as the emergence of challenger political parties, which pose a potentially existential risk to the party itself.

In recent years, Labour has struggled to distinguish itself from other left-wing and progressive parties that seek support from similar parts of the electorate. This includes the centre-left Green Party and, more recently, the Social Democrats, founded in 2015 partly as a breakaway from Labour, as well as the likes of Sinn Féin, the erstwhile political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA); the Socialist Party; People Before Profit (PBP) and other groups on the left. Meanwhile, the proportion of independent candidates elected to the Irish parliament is one of the highest anywhere in the world, many of whom are elected with social democratic platforms and instincts, heaping further pressure onto Ireland's historic party of the centre left. Finally, Fianna Fáil, which can fairly be described as a centrist, catch-all party, also has something of a social democratic tendency within its membership and has historically also appealed to some urban, working-class voters.

However, despite what can be seen as an objectively challenging political habitat in which to reside, the Irish Labour Party has consistently played a major and outsized role in Irish politics over its first 100 years. Labour has been absolutely in the vanguard of Ireland's economic and social development, including over decades when issues of morality and social progress, which are now seen as part of the mainstream, related to the role of women in society, the rights of LGBTQIA+ people, abortion rights and more besides, did not enjoy popular support at all. During this time, the Irish Labour Party acted consistently and often as a lone voice for progressive change and in support of marginalised groups, as the country transformed from a relatively poor agrarian society up to the 1980s and 1990s, where the political and societal centre of gravity was distinctly conservative, into the Ireland of today, which is seen as one of the most economically successful, socially progressive and highly integrated societies in the world.

1.3 The Irish political context

The Irish political environment is characterised by a relatively stable party system, which has been dominated by centrist forces for more than a century. However, especially since the aftermath of the country's ignominious bailout by the Troika in 2010, new left-wing and progressive parties and candidates have made electoral gains. Many of these, such as the aforementioned Sinn Féin and PBP, and other formations on the left, and to a lesser extent the Social Democrats and Greens on the centre-left, challenge the status quo, which includes the Labour Party, given the party's time in successive governments. Such parties all tend to advocate for social justice, economic equality and stronger public services, as the Labour Party does. The rise of these challenger parties has certainly created electoral challenges for Labour. The party

has attracted criticism for enabling centre and right-wing governments by supporting Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, rather than working to form a sustainable left-leaning alternative. Indeed, Labour has faced stiff competition, especially from Sinn Féin in recent years, which has proven especially adept at attracting younger voters, a traditional core constituency for Irish Labour, many of whom are disillusioned with the traditional political establishment.

In summary, the Irish Labour Party operates within a different political context than many other social democratic parties, given the absence of a traditional left-right divide in the country, and given the dominance of essentially centrist and centre-right parties in every government since the foundation of the state. The peculiarity of there being two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland, and the wider context of the conflict and peace settlement in Northern Ireland⁵ have all naturally influenced and shaped the party's development, electoral strategies and identity. Ireland is also essentially unique in the European context given the lack of any right-wing, anti-establishment, populist political parties in its parliament, the full analysis of which lies beyond the scope of this contribution.⁶ Taken together, these factors have conditioned the development of social democracy and social democratic parties in Ireland, including Irish Labour.

2

Historical development

2.1 Foundation and early years

As noted, the Irish Labour Party was founded in 1912, when Ireland was still a constituent part of the UK, by James Connolly, James Larkin, William O'Brien and others.⁷ Each of these figures were prominent trade union leaders and the party was initially established as the political wing of the Irish Trade Union Congress (ITUC), which was founded in 1894.⁸ In keeping with peer social democratic and left-wing parties, the party's primary objective was to represent the interests of the working class and to advocate for social and economic reforms. The ITUC was already a powerful force in Irish life, advocating for workers' rights, improved working conditions and social justice. At the Labour Party's founding, Ireland was entering a revolutionary period, which ran from approximately 1912, the year that saw the establishment of the Labour Party, to 1923, the year that saw the end of the country's Civil War (1922-1923), which followed the country's War of Independence against Great Britain (1919-1921). This period ushered in a phase of significant political and economic change.⁹ This short contribution cannot do justice to the nuance of this revolutionary period but, suffice to say, much of the country's political context and peculiarities can be traced back to this time.

A key staging post, not just in the history of the Labour Party and trade union movement, but for Ireland, is the 1913-1914 Dublin Lockout. The Lockout remains the most significant industrial dispute in the country's history and saw approximately 20,000 workers across the greater Dublin area clash with some 300 employers over the right to unionise, as well as the poor working conditions and impoverished situation of many Irish workers.¹⁰ This period of social and political tumult that followed reached its apogee at the 1916 Easter Rising, which represents the country's key revolutionary moment, and which would ultimately lead to independence and separation from the UK in 1921.

Scottish-born James Connolly, widely seen as one of the most important political and social figures in Irish history, was a Marxist theorist and an advocate for workers' rights. Under Connolly's influence, Labour had a distinctly socialist ethos in its early years, before adopting a more moderate, social democratic stance in the following decades.

Early successes and challenges

The 1916 Easter Rising saw an alliance of Irish republicans mount an armed insurrection against British rule. The most prominent groups involved in the revolt were Óglaigh na hÉireann (the Irish Volunteers), a nationalist paramilitary organisation; Cumann na mBan, a republican women's paramilitary organisation that was an auxiliary of Óglaigh na hÉireann; and the Irish Citizens' Army (ICA), a workers' paramilitary organisation formed in 1913 by James Connolly, James Larkin and others to defend pickets and workers during the Dublin Lockout.¹¹ Beginning on 24 April, with a proclamation of independence being read by Pádraig Pearse on the steps of the General Post Office in Dublin, the Rising laid waste to parts of the city centre. It lasted less than a week before being put down by the British army. Coming at what

would be the mid-point of the First World War, Britain responded swiftly and brutally to the uprising, executing 16 of the rebel leaders, including James Connolly, in May 1916 in Kilmainham Gaol in the southern inner city. The nature and speed of the executions ultimately contributed to an increase in popular support for the rebels and for the case of Irish independence.

A landmark moment in the Labour Party's early years came shortly after at the 1918 general election when the party opted not to contest the election to avoid splitting the nationalist vote. This was seen then – as now – as a critical decision, which would ultimately contribute to the securing of Irish independence from the UK in 1921, but also to the development of Labour as the historical “third party” in Irish politics. Labour opted instead to focus on its activities at the local level, where it was beginning to establish roots, particularly in urban areas where the trade union movement was strongest. The party ultimately struggled to gain major political traction at any level, as the primary focus of most voters was on the emerging national question related to the country's independence, rather than on the social and economic issues that were at the centre of Labour's agenda. Still, the party played an important role in advocating for the rights of workers and the poor during this time of social and political upheaval.

Labour's first electoral breakthrough came in the 1922 election, when the party secured 17 of 128 seats in Dáil Éireann, making it the third-largest party, albeit at some distance behind the pro- and anti-treaty groups, which would later evolve into Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, which secured 58 and 36 seats, respectively. While this election established Labour as a serious political force, its scope for influence was limited given the relative size of the two main groups.

Two-and-a-half party system

After the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, Ireland's modern political landscape took shape, eventually solidifying into what was often referred to as a “two and a half party system”. This system was characterised by the dominance of the two Civil War parties – Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael – as well as the Labour Party. Despite being the oldest party in the country, and having a strong base in urban working-class areas, Labour consistently found itself as the “half” in this system, playing a secondary role to the two main parties, as we have seen.

Fianna Fáil, founded in 1926 by Éamon de Valera, became the dominant political force in Ireland for much of the 20th century and appealed to a broad spectrum of voters, focusing on those who had opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Fine Gael, on the other hand, was formed in 1933 as a successor to the pro-Treaty Cumann na nGaedheal, and leaned more to the right and focused on those who supported the Treaty. Historically, Fine Gael favoured maintaining closer ties with the UK and many of its leadership sided with General Franco during the Spanish Civil War.¹²

The Labour Party's position in this system was also complicated by its focus on social and economic issues, which, while critical, were often overshadowed by questions related to Irish independence that defined Irish politics during the revolutionary period and the following decades. Labour's support was concentrated in urban areas, particularly among trade union members and the working class, and the party struggled to expand its support beyond these constituencies in its first decades. This limited appeal made it difficult for Labour to effectively challenge the dominance of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, both of which were able to attract a more diverse electorate, including among rural and middle-class voters.

Until late into the 20th century, Irish society was strongly influenced by the Catholic Church, and social conservatism shaped attitudes and policies related to matters of family, sexuality and morality. Allied to this, the dominant mainstream parties of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael espoused essentially conservative values throughout the 20th century. In recent times, Irish society has transitioned from an objectively conservative society into one of the most progressive societies in the world.¹³ Despite its limited role in successive governments, the Labour Party was absolutely and consistently at the forefront of each of these progressive campaigns. Homosexuality was decriminalised and divorce was made legal in 1993 and 1995, respectively. In 2015, Ireland became the first country in the world to enshrine marriage equality in the national constitution via referendum. This was followed by a referendum that would change the rules regulating abortion, which saw Ireland liberalise its previously restrictive regime to bring it into line with the European mainstream in 2018. Over its first hundred years, the Irish Labour Party has been the most prominent and consistent political actor calling for progressive change in Ireland, including in the decades before the majority of public sentiment would move in this direction.

Notably also, in the 1970s and 1980s, in keeping with a view widely held among social democratic parties across Europe, including in France and the UK, the Irish Labour Party opposed Ireland joining the then European Economic Community (EEC), as some within the labour movement viewed the budding European project as posing risks to workers' rights and the terms and conditions of employment. As is the case in other European countries, Irish Labour is now among the most vocal supporters of European integration in the country, and the Irish public remains consistently among those most in favour of the European Union (EU). Today, support for the European project lies at the centre of the party's policy and political agenda.

2.2 Post-independence struggles

The Irish Labour Party faced major challenges in the early years of Irish independence. The most immediate issue was Labour's stance during the Irish Civil War (1922-1923), when the party chose to remain neutral, a position that was intended to keep the party above the fray but ultimately resulted in it being side-lined in the national debate. On one hand, this allowed the party to maintain its focus on social and economic issues, rather than becoming embroiled in the divisive national question. On the other hand, this also led to Labour being perceived as irrelevant in the most critical and existential political struggle of the time, which ultimately hampered its ability to attract support. As a consequence, in the aftermath of the Civil War, Labour would struggle to carve out a distinct political identity, as it tried to assert itself as a party focused on class-based issues in a political landscape that was still defined by national divisions.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Labour continued to participate in elections with moderate success in urban areas, but it remained a relatively small player in the national arena, at a time when small political parties were coming and going. The party's struggles as a representative of the working class were compounded by the fact that Ireland was still a predominantly rural society, and the country's urban, working-class base was relatively small. Moreover, the party's close association with the trade union movement, while a strength in terms of mobilising support among workers, would limit its appeal to other segments of the population, particularly farmers and the middle class.

2.3 Labour's 20th century

Following the early decades of the 20th century, the Labour Party experienced periods of growth and decline. Arguably, the standout moments are the party's participation in coalition governments. While this allowed the party to influence policy and advance its agenda, it also posed major challenges in satisfying its base and maintaining its identity.

Early growth and coalition governments

Following the party's struggles to grow in the post-independence period, which was marked by the dominance of the two Civil War parties, the Labour Party began to experience growth by the mid-20th century, as the focus within government shifted from national independence to social and economic development. Labour first entered government from 1948 to 1951 and again in 1954-1957, both times under the leadership of William Norton (1900-1963), as part of what have been dubbed the first and "inter-party governments".¹⁴ Each of these governments was composed of a multi-party coalition led by Fine Gael alongside smaller parties and independents. As a junior partner in these coalitions, Labour inevitably made compromises, and its impact was often overshadowed by the larger Fine Gael, under the country's second Taoiseach, John A. Costello (1891-1976). Nonetheless, Labour's participation in government during this period allowed it to push through social reforms, such as the introduction of a social housing programme, improved pension rights and improved conditions for agricultural workers, to bolster the country's fledgling welfare state.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a period of relative stability for Labour, marked by incremental growth in its support nationally, as well as

consolidation at the local branch level.¹⁵ The party served both in opposition and in government during this time, playing a crucial role in advancing reforms in education and social welfare. A key policy from 1967 saw the expansion of free secondary education, which has had a lasting impact on Irish society and is often cited as one of the forces that drove the country's economic transformation from the 1990s. While this reform was introduced by a Fianna Fáil-led government, Labour campaigned tirelessly to ensure the prospect of publicly funded education was mainstreamed in public discourse. Labour served in government from 1973 to 1977 alongside Fine Gael, under the leadership of the country's fifth Taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave, in what is referred to as the "national coalition", the first time Labour had served in government since 1957. This government took office in March 1973, only weeks after Ireland had joined the then EEC in the bloc's first enlargement round.

The 1980s ushered in a difficult decade for both Ireland and the Irish Labour Party. The country entered a period of economic stagnation, inflation, high unemployment and mass emigration. For Labour, this period was characterised by steady electoral decline and internal strife. The party faced stiff competition from other parties, including a resurgent Fianna Fáil under the charismatic leadership of Charles Haughey, the country's sixth Taoiseach, as well as an emerging Sinn Féin, which was gaining traction as a voice of the nationalist left. Additionally, the emergence of the Workers' Party, with its roots in Marxism, further split the already underdeveloped left-wing vote.

The 1980s also ushered in a period of uncharacteristic political volatility in the country, with five separate governments spanning the decade. Labour's participation in the 1981-1982 and 1982-1987 coalition governments with Fine Gael, under the country's sixth Taoiseach, Garret Fitzgerald, was marked by significant internal conflict

within the party. The country's economic difficulties led successive governments to implement austerity measures, which were – as ever – deeply unpopular and alienated much of Labour's support. In keeping with its experience in office on subsequent occasions, the party's association with austerity policies led to a perception that Labour had abandoned its core principles when in government. By the late 1980s, Labour was struggling to maintain relevance in a political landscape that was still polarised between the electorally dominant Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The party's share of the vote declined, and it faced significant challenges in presenting itself as a credible alternative to the larger parties.

The 1990s brought a modest resurgence for Labour. The party made significant gains in the 1992 general election, securing 33 seats, its highest ever number to that point, and the party formed part of coalition governments from 1992 to 1997. This included a Fianna Fáil-Labour coalition (1992-1994), under the country's eighth Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds, and what is dubbed the "rainbow coalition" (1994-1997) formed of Fine Gael, Labour and Democratic Left,¹⁶ under the country's ninth Taoiseach, John Bruton.¹⁷ This marks a novelty in modern Irish political history and is the only time to date that a new government was formed within the same Dáil term composed of a different coalition of parties and with a different Taoiseach. This also set up Labour as a reliable party of government in the eyes of many.

Labour's participation in this government allowed the party to advance important social reforms. In one of the party's major policy interventions, Labour Minister for Education Niamh Breathnach introduced legislation that eliminated tuition fees for undergraduate students studying in Ireland. This period was also marked by steady economic growth and a return to relative political stability, which saw sustained inward foreign direct investment coming into the country,

especially from US-owned multinational corporations. This would have a major impact on public spending, the structure of employment across the country and the nature of Irish society itself.¹⁸

The late 1990s and early 2000s were marked by a resurgent Fianna Fáil under the country's tenth Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, and a period of decline for the Labour Party. It also saw the culmination of the Northern Irish peace process and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998. Labour struggled to maintain its momentum and relevance during this time, known as the Celtic Tiger period, referring to the years of sustained real economic growth in the 1990s and 2000s that was fuelled in large part by foreign direct investment, and EU membership allowed for a rapid expansion of public spending and infrastructure development. This saw uninterrupted Fianna Fáil-led governments from 1997 to 2011. During this time, the rise of other left-wing parties, such as the Irish Green Party (founded in 1981) and Sinn Féin, further eroded Labour's already limited support base. Meanwhile, the merger of Democratic Left with Labour in 1999 introduced both new members and ideas into the party while also creating new tensions as the party struggled to integrate different but related political cultures.

As the smaller player in the country's two and a half party system, Labour would ultimately serve in seven coalition governments during the 20th century and once in the 21st. The party entered government as a junior partner on each occasion and was unable to fully implement its agenda, leading to frustration among supporters and contributing to the perception that Labour was a "permanent minority" party – important enough to influence policy but not powerful enough to lead. Still, the party has served in coalition governments on eight occasions, seven times with Fine Gael and once with Fianna Fáil. In total, Labour has served in government for 25 years, the third-longest total of any party after the two Civil War parties, and has left its mark on Irish society.

The 20th century saw periods of consolidation, growth and decline for the Irish Labour Party. The party's consistent representation in parliament from 1922 and involvement in coalition governments allowed it to influence national policy, advance important social reforms, and ultimately affect changes to make people's lives better and to make Irish society fairer and more just. However, the compromises required by participation in coalition governments – then as much as now – led to internal strife and to a dilution of the party's identity. This is a challenge that all parties must face in a system where coalition governments are the norm. However, Labour's historic role as the “third party” in a two-and-a-half party system made it even more vulnerable to being overpowered by bigger parties when in coalition, and to being undermined by smaller parties ready to pounce from opposition. These challenges set the stage for the further struggles and transformations the party would face in the 21st century.

3

The Irish Labour Party in the 21st century

3.1 Crisis and renewal

The 2008 financial crisis

Following the end of the rainbow coalition, at the 1997 general election, Labour lost almost half its seats and returned to opposition, where it would remain for more than a decade. Fianna Fáil on the other hand began a period of electoral dominance from 1997 to 2011, with Taoiseach Bertie Ahern winning three consecutive elections (1997, 2002 and 2007). This coincided with the Celtic Tiger years of sustained economic growth, which would set the scene for the economic and social turmoil that was to come.

The global financial crisis, which was unleashed in 2008, had a devastating impact on Ireland. The country experienced a severe economic downturn that exposed deep vulnerabilities within the Irish economy. This saw the bursting of a housing bubble, coupled with a banking crisis, which led to a dramatic rise in unemployment, plummeting property values and a sharp decline in public finances. In autumn 2008, the Fianna Fáil-Green coalition government, facing the potential collapse of the country's banking system, moved to guarantee

the liabilities of six of the country's banks, leading to an enormous increase in public debt.

In a bid to stabilise the economy, in December 2010, the government sought a financial bailout from the Troika, joining Greece, which had entered a similar programme the previous May. This saw Ireland essentially losing its economic sovereignty until 2013, when it successfully exited the bailout programme. During this period, the government agreed to implement reforms amounting to strict austerity measures and structural reforms in exchange for financial assistance. These measures included deeply unpopular cuts to public spending, reductions in social welfare benefits, tax increases, and the introduction of new taxes and charges.

Labour in government (2011-2016)

The 2009 European elections represent a high-water mark for the party at the European level, as three Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) – Proinsias da Rossa in Dublin, Nessa Childers in the Eastern constituency and future party leader Alan Kelly – were elected from the then 12-strong Irish delegation, with a vote share of 13.9%. This was seen as a positive result for the party, positioning it as the strong pro-European voice in Ireland. It also laid the foundations for the fateful 2011 general election that would follow.

We have noted how Labour's performance in the 2011 general election marks the high point of the party's electoral success. The party won 37 seats, securing 19.4% of the vote, its best-ever result. This success had as much to do with support for Labour in opposition as it did for public dissatisfaction with the outgoing Fianna Fáil-Green Party government, which was blamed for the economic crisis and the ignominy of the 2010 bailout agreement with the Troika. Nonetheless, Labour was elected on a platform of fairness and social

justice, committing to limiting austerity. Labour entered a coalition government with Fine Gael, which served a full term until 2016.

In the wake of the financial crisis, Fianna Fáil entered electoral freefall, being widely blamed for the economic crisis, the ignominious Troika bailout and the austerity that went with it. The Labour Party experienced a surge in support, by positioning itself as the party that could provide a fairer approach to economic recovery, which would inevitably follow the bailout. The 2011 general election saw the Labour Party achieve its best-ever electoral result, winning 37 seats and entering the Dáil as the second-largest party after Fine Gael, with whom Labour entered into coalition for the seventh time in history. The government was led by Fine Gael's Enda Kenny, the country's 12th Taoiseach, with Labour leader Eamon Gilmore serving as Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. Several other key Labour figures took on significant ministerial roles. The Labour Party's position in government from 2011 was widely seen as an opportunity for the party to influence the recovery process and to ensure that the burden of austerity was shared fairly. Instead, the coalition government faced the daunting task of stabilising the economy, restoring Ireland's international reputation and navigating the austere conditions imposed by the EU-IMF bailout.

During its most recent time in government, Labour's policy agenda was shaped by the demands of the economic crisis and the constraints of the EU-IMF bailout conditions. The party's focus was similar to that of any social democratic party in this position, focused as it was on stabilising the economy, restoring Ireland's international reputation and protecting the most vulnerable as much as possible within the limits of the austerity programme. In practice, this saw Labour seeking to moderate the worst consequences of austerity by maintaining essential public services, while cutting others

amid severe budgetary constraints. Labour also maintained its pro-European stance, having radically changed course in this respect since the 1970s. While Ireland remained one of the most Euro-enthusiastic populations, even throughout the bailout period, the EU was (correctly) associated with the country's austerity, and Labour's close association with the EU project did not endear it to the voting public. In terms of wider progress around matters of social justice, Labour was the driving force behind the likes of the 2015 marriage equality referendum and also laid the legislative foundations for the "repeal the eighth [amendment to the constitution]" referendum campaign, which followed in 2018 and brought Ireland closer to the EU mainstream in terms of reproductive rights. In terms of promoting a fairer and more equal Ireland, Labour can rightly see these as major achievements from its most recent time in government, despite the electoral consequences that it has faced.

As was the case across Europe, these years of austerity saw significant economic contractions, increased unemployment, reduced consumption, and a widely negative impact on public services and health outcomes, with the burden often falling most heavily on the poorest. In addition, this period saw an erosion of public trust in democracy and, it should be said, with the Labour Party in particular. As was the experience of many social democratic parties across Europe that found themselves in government at that time,¹⁹ Labour was essentially complicit in dismantling parts of the state that it had worked for its entire existence to create and sustain. As the impact of austerity was felt, many voters who had supported Labour felt betrayed, believing the party had abandoned its principles in favour of maintaining its position in government. Here, Irish Labour experienced the same difficult choices that many parties on the left so often face, between being willing to make tough

decisions in government or remaining in opposition and criticising those in power. In this instance, Labour chose the former and paid the electoral price.

2014 local and European elections

The consequences of Labour's role in the austerity government landed at the 2014 local and European elections where the party fared badly. At the local elections, Labour lost 81 seats, falling to 51, and more than half of its overall support, falling 7.5% to 7.2% (see Table 1). Its coalition partner, Fine Gael, also lost 8.2% from the previous election but from a higher base of over 32%, and remained the second-largest party in local government after Fianna Fáil. Since 1994, local elections in Ireland have been organised to coincide with elections to the European Parliament. The 2014 European elections were even more disastrous for Labour, as the party lost all of its MEPs (from Ireland's relatively small delegation of 11), securing only 5.3% of the vote (see Table 2). Overall, Labour lost much of its support to the likes of Sinn Féin and PBP, who successfully positioned themselves as the opponents to austerity. This was the first clear signal of growing public discontent with Labour's role in the austerity government, and of the electoral challenges that would follow.

Table 1. Labour Party's local election performance 2009-2024.

| Year | Seats won | Total seats available |
|------|-----------|-----------------------|
| 2009 | 132 | 883 |
| 2014 | 51 | 949 |
| 2019 | 57 | 949 |
| 2024 | 56 | 949 |

Table 2. Labour Party's European election performance 2009-2024.

| Year | Seats won | Total seats available |
|------|-----------|-----------------------|
| 2009 | 132 | 883 |
| 2014 | 51 | 949 |
| 2019 | 57 | 949 |
| 2024 | 56 | 949 |

As is often the case within parties on the left, the period in government was also marked by internal fractures, as tensions arose over the party's direction and the compromises it made while in government. The party lost eight TDs, who defected to the opposition benches, over the lifetime of the government.²⁰ In the wake of the 2014 elections, party leader Eamon Gilmore stood down to be replaced by his deputy, Joan Burton, the first woman to hold the post.

2016 general election

Worse was to come for Labour less than two years later at the 2016 general election. The party held just seven seats, down from 37, with its vote share plummeting to 6.6%, marking one of the worst electoral performances in the party's history, and one of the most dramatic swings for any party in Irish electoral history (see Table 3). This collapse can be seen as a direct result of public anger over austerity and the perception that Labour had not done enough to defend and promote its core principles while in government. After leading the party for two years, Joan Burton stood down following the poor showing in 2016 to be replaced by former Minister Brendan Howlin.

Table 3. Labour Party's general election performance 2009-2024.

| Year | Seats won | Total seats available |
|------|-----------|-----------------------|
| 2009 | 132 | 883 |
| 2014 | 51 | 949 |
| 2019 | 57 | 949 |
| 2024 | 56 | 949 |

After the 2016 elections, a new government made up of Fine Gael and a group of independent TDs under Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, the 13th in the country's history, took office. Labour returned to the opposition benches. The party embarked on a process of renewal, seeking to reconnect with its roots and rebuild its identity as a party of social justice and workers' rights. However, the political and electoral realities for Labour had changed, as the centre-left of Irish politics had become a more crowded place than before, with the likes of Sinn Féin, PBP, the Green Party and left-wing independents espousing often social democratic values and priorities and seeking support from the same parts of the electorate as Labour. Meanwhile, from 2015, a new party, the Social Democrats, was formed by former members of the Labour Party. The Social Democrats were vocal in their criticism of Labour in government, while espousing a policy platform that was almost indistinguishable from that of the Labour Party.

After 2016, as a return to government felt increasingly remote for Labour,²¹ the party's focus shifted towards rebuilding trust with its traditional base. In opposition, the party emphasised a return to its core principles, advocating for stronger public services, affordable housing and childcare, and social equality. Labour also sought to reassert its position as a pro-European, progressive force in Irish politics, while trying (unsuccessfully) to distance itself from the austerity measures that had defined its time in government.

2019 local and European elections

At its first electoral test following its ejection from government in 2016, the 2019 local elections offered little respite for Labour, with the party winning 57 seats, representing a small recovery from 2014 in terms of seats, but on a reduced overall percentage, falling by 1.4% since the previous election (see Table 2). At the 2019 European elections, Labour secured only 3.3% of the national vote and returned no MEPs. The rise of Sinn Féin and the Greens as significant players in European politics further squeezed Labour's scope for manoeuvre. The party would remain without an MEP for a decade, between 2014 and 2024, a loss that many in the party felt keenly.

2020 general election

The general election in February 2020, coming in the narrow window between the start of the year and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, ushered in a watershed in Irish electoral politics as Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and Fine Gael finished almost tied, with 38, 37 and 35 seats, respectively, in the 160-seat Dáil. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael agreed to govern together for the first time in a confidence-and-supply arrangement. This marks a critical juncture in Irish history and the end of the century-old electoral duopoly of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, along with the rise of Sinn Féin as the third force in Irish politics.²² Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, which between them had led every government in the history of the state, formed a coalition for the first time, along with the smaller Green Party, and formed a cabinet drawn from both sides of the historical Civil War divide. This would also see the emergence of something like a left/right divide in Irish politics, as the bulk of the opposition was made up by Sinn Féin, Labour, the Social Democrats, the Greens, and smaller left-wing parties and independents. However,

Labour's decline continued, as the party fell from seven seats to six, attracting only 4.4% of the vote, a historic low for Labour (see Table 1).

2024 elections – green shoots of recovery?

In 2024, the Irish public went to the polls in June for local and European elections and for parliamentary elections in November. These polls marked the first evidence of sustained recovery for the party, following almost a decade in the political wilderness. At the local elections, Labour arrested its decline and held onto 56 of the 57 seats they had secured at the previous election in 2019, dropping 0.4% to 5.3%. Meanwhile, with a population of around 5.3 million, Ireland elected 14 MEPs, the ninth smallest delegation in the now 720-seat assembly. The people of Dublin elected Aodhán O'Riardáin, a TD and former minister, to the European Parliament, ending Labour's decade-long exile from the EU-wide assembly. As a member of the EU-UK Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, O'Riardáin has promoted the right to representation for the people of Northern Ireland within the European Parliament, working quickly to re-establish Irish Labour's reputation for responsible and progressive leadership at the EU level.

A general election was held in November 2024. The electorate would be the only one in the Western world that year to return the incumbents to government, with the return of the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael coalition, supported by a small group of independents in lieu of the Green Party, which was routed. Labour marked steady gains, returning 4.7% of the vote and 11 TDs, including a few recovered from former heartlands, such as the cities of Cork and Limerick in the south of the country as well as in the commuter belt adjacent to Dublin. Notably, the Social Democrats secured the same number of 11 TDs and a slightly higher proportion of the vote at 4.8%. This shows the existence of

a clear social democratic constituency in Ireland, especially with the inclusion of like-minded parties, such as the Green Party, and some independents.

The presidential exception (2011-2018)

While the years following 2011 mark a period of significant, sustained electoral decline for the Labour Party, one paradox exists in the form of the president of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins. Ireland is a constitutional and parliamentary republic. The head of state is the president, who is elected every seven years for up to two terms. The president forms part of the Houses of the Oireachtas but has no executive powers, as set out in Articles 12-14 of Bunreacht na hÉireann, the Irish Constitution.²³ The president can make references to the Supreme Court to test the constitutionality of draft legislation and plays an important role representing the country, especially overseas. Previous office holders have included Mary Robinson (1990-1997), who would subsequently serve as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (1997-2002) and would reach global attention as a climate and social justice campaigner as one of the Elders, and Mary McAleese, the renowned constitutional lawyer and academic.

The office of the president is seen as being “above politics”, and office holders resign any party affiliations they may have upon entering Áras an Uachtaráin, the official residence of the president. Michael D. Higgins was elected president in 2011, as the first candidate to secure one million votes in any Irish election,²⁴ and was re-elected in 2018. President Higgins had previously served as a Labour TD for almost 40 years, first elected in 1981, representing Galway in the west of the country, and as a Senator before that. As a TD, Michael D. Higgins has long been associated with anti-war campaigning and the preservation and promotion of the Irish culture and language. While he

officially resigned his membership, President Higgins is inescapably associated with the party of James Connolly. Throughout his time in office, President Higgins has remained popular and well-respected, bucking the trend electorally for anybody associated so closely with Labour. Arguably, this also points towards the existence of a social democratic constituency in the Irish electorate, despite the relatively modest fortunes of Labour and other parties on the centre-left in terms of parliamentary and local authority politics, especially in recent years.

Summary

The 21st century has thus far been a period of significant upheaval for the Irish Labour Party. The 2008 financial crisis and subsequent austerity measures implemented during its time in government from 2011 to 2016 led to a severe loss of public trust and electoral support (see Figure 1). Labour’s involvement in implementing these measures, despite its initial promises, resulted in internal fractures and the rise of new social democratic challengers. The party has attempted to

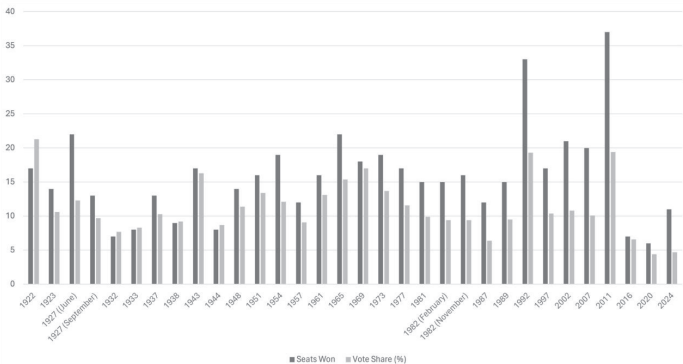


Figure 1. Labour’s electoral performance 1912-2024.

engage in a process of renewal, focusing on reconnecting with its core values and rebuilding its identity in a changing political landscape. This involves re-engaging with the trade union movement, attempting to revitalise the party's grassroots organisation and developing a policy platform that resonates with voters who had become disillusioned by the party's performance in government. The most recent elections, which took place in 2024, discussed above provide evidence of the first green shoots of recovery for the party, as it finally begins to recover from its bruising time in government.

3.2 How the party has changed over time

We have seen how Labour's most recent period in government (2011-2016) resulted in major challenges for the party and several changes in leadership. The context and significance of some of these changes are discussed here, as is the knock-on effect this has had on Labour Party policy and strategy, as it seeks to find a place for itself in modern Irish political life and society.

Leadership changes

As with any party, the context and vision of the Irish Labour Party in the 21st century has been significantly shaped by its leaders. Labour has had 14 leaders since its foundation in 1912, five of whom have come and gone over a little more than a decade since the onset of the party's recent travails. The leadership of Eamon Gilmore (2007-2014) marked a period of growth and optimism for Labour. Taking over as leader from Pat Rabbitte in 2007, Gilmore, first elected as a TD in 1989, led the party to its best-ever electoral performance in 2011. However, as discussed, his tenure was marked by the difficulties associated with

Labour's role in the austerity-era government with Fine Gael. As public dissatisfaction grew, so did internal dissent within the party. Gilmore resigned in 2014, following the party's poor performance at the local and European elections, which were widely seen as a referendum on Labour's role in sponsoring austerity – and on Gilmore's leadership.

First elected in 1992, Joan Burton TD succeeded Gilmore, serving from 2014 to 2016. Burton faced the daunting task of steering the party through an increasingly hostile political environment, as the impact of the government's austerity measures were landing in people's homes and workplaces. As Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection, Burton sought to defend Labour's record in government, emphasising the party's role in stabilising the economy, limiting austerity and advocating for social justice. However, inevitably, Burton was more closely associated with cuts to public spending and was unable to reverse the party's declining fortunes, and she resigned in the wake of the disastrous 2016 general election.

Brendan Howlin, a Labour stalwart, first elected TD in 1987, served as leader from 2016 to 2020, with a mandate to rebuild the party following its worst electoral performance ever. Howlin's leadership focused on internal reorganisation, renewing the party's commitment to its core values and attempting to reconnect with voters who had abandoned Labour. Despite his best efforts, Labour continued to struggle to regain relevance, and Howlin stepped down in 2020, to be replaced by former MEP and Minister Alan Kelly.

Serving as leader from 2020 to 2022, Kelly's leadership represented an attempt to revitalise Labour's image and make it more relevant in the new political landscape. The 2020 election saw Labour's decline continue, as the party fell from seven seats to six, attracting only 4.4% of the vote, a historic low for Labour (see Table 1). Nonetheless, in its wake, Kelly sought to take the opportunity to emphasise Labour's

distinctiveness from both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and to position the party as a progressive alternative to Sinn Féin. However, his tenure was relatively short-lived. Kelly was still associated with the austerity era, having served as a minister in the 2011-2016 government, and he did not represent the break with the past or fresh start that the party arguably needed.

Ivana Bacik was elected leader in 2022, at a time when Labour was struggling in the polls and struggling to differentiate itself from other parties on the left, especially the Social Democrats. A well-known academic, constitutional law expert and Labour Senator, Bacik has been a prominent advocate for social justice and progressive causes for decades. Her leadership has sought to modernise the party's image, with a focus on gender equality, climate change, housing and workers' rights. Bacik's tenure has, to a certain degree, succeeded in its effort to re-establish Labour as a relevant and forward-thinking force in Irish politics, particularly by appealing to younger and more progressive voters. Crucially, Bacik's leadership also presents Labour with a much-needed opportunity for a fresh start, given that she did not hold a ministerial portfolio during the now infamous 2011-2016 government discussed above. In her first general election as leader, in 2024 Labour made steady progress, returning 11 TDs, up from six, in the enlarged Dáil – which was up to 174 seats in total from 160 in the previous election in 2020. In terms of its appeal, in the past, Labour could be said to represent a coalition of working-class urban voters and middle-class liberals. While this remains broadly the case today, it's also clear that competition for urban working-class voters in particular is increasingly fierce, with the likes of Sinn Féin and PBP making steady progress at Labour's expense, and the median Labour voter today is likely to come from a middle-class liberal background.

Evolving priorities

Historically, Labour has been positioned on the left of the Irish political spectrum, advocating for social justice, workers' rights and state intervention in the economy. However, its role in the austerity government from 2011 to 2016 has led to a perceptible shift towards the centre-left, as the party had to balance its traditional social democratic principles with the demands of fiscal responsibility and the conditions imposed by the Troika bailout. The past years have seen Labour try to find its place in an ever-more-crowded field. Of course, any party that has existed and endured for over a century must be open to change as the interests and priorities of voters and supporters change.

During its most recent time in government, Labour has sought to balance its core principles with the demands of governing. Labour in government supported decisions that were made in the interest of the country's economic recovery but which unambiguously challenged or contradicted Labour's social democratic values. A quote often attributed to former Fianna Fáil and Progressive Democrat²⁵ Government Minister Mary Harney, but not originating with her, says that "the worst day in government is better than the best day in opposition". This is often used to remind smaller parties in particular that taking risks, entering government and working to deliver change for citizens, even in difficult times, is always better than not, and you can always achieve more in government than you ever could in opposition. A widely held view in 2011, and at other junctures when smaller parties entered government, was that it was still better to have a small progressive party in government to restrain the worst impulses of right-wing parties. While each of these views are almost definitely true, the electoral consequences can often still be devastating, as Labour learned.

Throughout the challenging austerity years, despite Labour introducing structural reforms that flew in the face of many of the party's

core values of fairness, justice and social cohesion, the party has consistently maintained a commitment to social justice and progressive values, which have delivered demonstrable and meaningful change. This includes the culmination of the decades-long campaigns for marriage equality, abortion rights and gender equality, all issues that Labour has been at the forefront of. The party's ideological focus has also developed to increasingly take in environmental concerns, reflecting a broader shift in global social democratic thinking towards incorporating climate change and sustainability, which also reflects the increasing competition from green parties on the left side of the political spectrum.

An important internal debate for Labour focuses on how the party can (re)engage with younger voters, many of whom are increasingly attracted to parties like Sinn Féin and the Greens, as well as the Social Democrats. Labour must continue to strike a balance between the need to modernise its platform to appeal to a younger demographic without alienating its traditional base. This has led to increasingly vocal discussions about the party's stance on issues such as climate change, housing and digital rights.

Perhaps the most consequential shift that Labour has undergone over the past 50 years relates to the party's now devoutly pro-European stance. In the run up to Ireland joining the then EEC in 1973, many within Labour espoused a cautious approach to European integration, seeing it as a capitalist project that would undermine the interests and rights of workers. As the European social model evolved, as the notion of the European social market economy became more clearly articulated, and with the introduction of the social chapter under the Maastricht Treaty in particular, as well as environmental legislation which followed, the party clearly and unambiguously moved from a position of scepticism to the European project to being among the most strongly

pro-European voices in Ireland in the 21st century. This pro-European stance is one area where Labour can distinguish itself effectively from the likes of Sinn Féin and PBP, which remain more overtly hostile to the European project.

Labour's historical connection with the trade union movement, which is discussed in the next section, remains a central aspect of the party's identity. The interests of workers in a modern economy, particularly in the face of rising precarious work and the gig economy, and the high cost of living, are major priorities for Labour. In more recent years, other parties on the left, including Sinn Féin, have cultivated strong links with trade unions, and several Sinn Féin TDs come from a trade union background. Still, Labour continues to protect and develop its relations with the trade unions, where the party's connection to the European and international social democratic movement helps to maintain Labour's credibility among the union movement. Indeed, the maintenance of good relations with unions will remain a central part of Labour's prospects of ever returning to government in the future.

Finally, there are ongoing debates within Labour about the potential for strategic alliances with other parties, as discussed in more depth below. Predictably, there are some within the party who argue for closer cooperation with other left-wing and progressive parties, such as the Social Democrats and the Greens, while others caution against diluting Labour's distinct identity. Discussions consider the prospects for outright mergers between parties to electoral pacts and cooperation around specific campaigns. This debate reflects broader questions about the future direction of the party and the role of smaller parties in Irish politics.

Trade unions and Labour

The relationship between the Labour Party and the trade union movement has been a cornerstone of the party's identity since its foundation in 1912. The party was born out of the labour movement, with its early leaders rooted in trade unionism. For much of its history, Labour and the trade unions have had shared political objectives focused on the advancement of workers' rights and social justice. Historically, the alliance between Labour and the unions was mutually beneficial. Labour provided a political voice for workers, by advocating for policies that protected workers, improved working conditions and expanded social protection. During periods of social partnership, the unions played an important role in shaping national economic and social policies. In return, the unions provided Labour with a reliable base of support, in terms of votes and organisational strength.

Today, there is one peak union organisation in Ireland, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), which has over 50 trade unions across the island of Ireland. While ICTU and Labour are both part of the wider labour movement and share many objectives and members, ICTU is not formally affiliated with the Labour Party. Today, around 25-30% of workers in Ireland are in a union, with a higher density in the smaller public sector, and collective bargaining coverage stands at around 44%.²⁶ The past decades have seen a steady decline in union membership across Europe, including in Ireland. As recently as the 1980s, around 60% of workers were in a union. The Labour Party is historically connected to several trade unions and has a specific group, the Labour Trade Union Group, for union-affiliated members.

Economic change and the onset of globalisation have exerted pressure on trade unions and the dominant party-union nexus, which exists across much of Europe, including Ireland.²⁷ Several factors

have contributed to this decline, including the steady liberalisation of labour markets and the increasing pre-eminence of “competitiveness” in industrial and economic policy. Meanwhile, structural changes, the changing nature of work and the shift away from manufacturing and heavy industry to a more service-oriented economy; the rise of precarious employment and the gig economy; and the arrival of tens of thousands of new workers into difficult to organise sectors, such as construction and services, following the EU’s 2004 enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe, further weakened the capacity for unions to organise workers. This sees many workers filling roles in industries that are typically harder for unions to organise in. The high concentration of US employers in Ireland, many of whom are resistant to union recognition, only further undermines union power, while younger workers are also less likely to join a union anyway.

Notably, in the past, a handful of unions in Ireland, including the country’s largest, SIPTU, were directly affiliated to the Labour Party. In April 2017, Labour changed its constitution to end organisational affiliation, while creating the aforementioned separate Labour Trade Unionists Group. SIPTU, which organises across both the public and private sectors, continues to provide financial support to union members running for political office, but this is no longer limited to Labour Party candidates, provided that they pledge to support the union’s policies. Certainly, Labour’s role in the 2011-2016 government, and the austerity which went with it, led to tensions with the unions and union members.

Additionally, the theme that haunts this short contribution, Labour continues to struggle to escape from being associated with the implementation of austerity during its most recent time in government from 2011 to 2016, which led to tensions with the unions and union members. Nonetheless, Labour’s ongoing relationship with the trade

union movement remains an important aspect of its identity. Labour parties everywhere must find new ways to represent the interests of a more diverse and fragmented workforce to maintain their role as the party of workers.

Social partnership

Ireland maintained a form of social partnership from 1987 to 2009, which saw collaboration between representatives from government, employers, trade unions and other civil society organisations to negotiate and agree on policies designed to promote economic growth, social cohesion and industrial peace. Social partnership was first initiated in 1987 in response to the country's then ongoing economic crises, which were characterised by high unemployment, high inflation and soaring public debt. Social partnership arguably played a crucial role in Ireland's economic development during the Celtic Tiger years, and in total, the social partners concluded seven partnership agreements. Notably, Labour did not serve in government in the 1980s, and in its early years, social partnership was strongly associated with Fianna Fáil.

Notably the approach to social partnership in Ireland was voluntarist in nature, and it was never institutionalised in the way it is in other places, such as in Belgium and the Nordic countries. This made the system in Ireland vulnerable to exogenous shock or political withdrawal. The austerity implemented as part of the EU-IMF bailout would ultimately fatally undermine the consensus that had been the foundation of social partnership. In 2009, the model effectively collapsed, as the government took unilateral action to address the burgeoning economic crisis, side-lining the unions and other social partners.²⁸

Social partnership has had a lasting influence on Irish society and on Labour's approach to politics and policy making, with the party typically favouring consensus building and collaboration with social

partners, rather than opposition or antagonism, even after the collapse of partnership. Indeed, Ireland records one of the lowest rates of days lost to strike in Europe,²⁹ in keeping with the emphasis on cooperation and conciliation, which is perhaps the most enduring legacy of the partnership era.

While other parties on the left, including Sinn Féin, have sought to cultivate stronger organic links with unions, Labour's connections to the European and international social democratic movement help to maintain Labour's credibility among the union movement, and the maintenance of good relations with unions will remain a central part of Labour's prospects of ever returning to government in the future.

Summary

The internal dynamics of the Irish Labour Party in the 21st century have been shaped by a series of leadership changes, ongoing ideological shifts, and debates about the party's direction and relations with other groups. Leadership transitions have typically reflected electoral setbacks, allied to efforts to renew the party's identity. From a radically different starting position, Labour's stance is decidedly pro-European, which, along with its emphasis on progressive social values, provide a core around which the rest of Labour's platform can evolve. Looking ahead to how this may feed into the party's electoral fortunes and capacity to govern, internal debates around balancing principles with pragmatism, maintaining ties with trade unions, engaging younger voters and forming strategic alliances continue to influence the party's trajectory, as it seeks to navigate the complex political landscape of modern Ireland. The relationship between the Labour Party and the trade unions has been one of the defining features of the party's identity. This relationship has been challenged by the decline in union membership, the changing nature of work and tensions that inevitably arise given

Labour's association with the 2011-2016 austerity government. The social partnership model, which played a significant role in shaping Ireland's economic and social policies for decades, has also influenced Labour's approach to politics and policy making by emphasising collaboration and cooperation, which endures.

3.3 Who votes for Labour in Ireland today?

Following this depiction of the current state of the Irish Labour Party, and its experience of the past two decades in particular, it is important to consider who votes, or might vote, for Labour today. Over the years, the demographic profile of the Labour Party's electorate has changed, reflecting broader shifts that have taken place across Irish society. The coalitions of voters that have supported Labour over its first century are similar in composition to those which have supported other social democratic parties, including unionised working-class voters, liberal middle-class voters and younger voters.

Labour's historical connections to the labour movement meant that it was long seen as the natural political home for workers, including those in public sector jobs and industries with strong union representation. In recent decades, there has been a shift of working-class sentiment and support away from Labour and towards the likes of the left nationalist Sinn Féin. Several factors have contributed to this. The impact of Labour's complicity in the administration of austerity between 2011 and 2016 contributed to many voters, including in traditional working-class communities, growing disillusioned and angry at Labour. Simply put, many of these voters felt that the party had abandoned its principles by supporting cuts to public services, social welfare and public sector wages. Sinn Féin has successfully positioned itself as the leading voice

against austerity, alongside other left-wing parties and independents. Ultimately, for many voters, Sinn Féin has successfully presented itself as the authentic representative of working-class interests, particularly in comparison with Labour, which has struggled with the perception that it is part of the political establishment. It should be said that Sinn Féin has never participated in government in the Republic of Ireland, and it is unclear if that the party would have behaved any differently than Labour has done in government. The UK's protracted withdrawal from the EU has also only increased the salience of discussions around Irish unity,³⁰ bringing it closer to the centre of public discourse. While Labour also supports the prospect of Irish unity, Sinn Féin has stronger nationalist credentials in the eyes of most voters, as the former political wing of the now decommissioned paramilitary IRA. This increases Sinn Féin's appeal to some voters, including in working-class communities, at the expense of Labour.

Aside from this, Labour has also enjoyed support among progressive, middle-class voters, particularly in urban centres in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Waterford. These voters are often attracted to Labour's emphasis on social justice, equality and progressive policies relating to matters of gender, housing, social inclusion and the environment. However, while Labour has ceded support to Sinn Féin in working-class communities, the party now also competes for support with the likes of the Greens and the Social Democrats among middle-class voters.

Finally, Labour has traditionally attracted support from many younger voters, including among students. Once again, while younger generations tend to support progressive social policies, many have turned to Sinn Féin and the Greens in recent years, seeing these parties as more dynamic and ambitious on urgent issues such as housing, climate change and social inequality. Labour's struggle to connect with

younger voters has been a significant factor in its declining electoral performance and is a major cause for concern for the party's future.

However, while Labour does continue to attract some young, liberal and progressive voters, and those who prioritise social justice issues and workers' rights, Labour faces stiff competition from other left-leaning parties. However, the one area where Labour can distinguish itself from its peers is in its distinctly pro-European stance and established connections to the EU and international levels; this presents an important point of differentiation for Labour in relation to its peers and competitors.

Membership trends

In addition to the structural change associated with the decline in union membership, the period following Labour's participation in the austerity government of 2011-2016 saw a significant drop off in engagement from members and supporters. Many members, disillusioned with Labour's role in implementing unpopular austerity measures, left the party altogether, given the perception some held that Labour had abandoned its principles during this period. Some elected representatives would go on to become involved in other parties, including the Social Democrats, while others became independent.

Reliable data on political party membership in Ireland is notoriously difficult to come by. Suffice it to say that Labour Party membership and overall support has fallen dramatically over recent decades, with a particular drop over the past decade. As discussed, the Irish Labour Party has historically maintained strong local organisation and has been closely linked to the trade union movement. Labour's membership has been characterised by a high level of engagement from public sector workers, union members, and activists committed to social justice and workers' rights. This connection provided the party with a solid

organisational foundation and a reliable source of grassroots support.

As noted, Labour now competes in a crowded field of left-wing and progressive parties, including Sinn Féin, the Social Democrats, PBP, the Greens and some independents, which have each attracted members who might have previously supported Labour. These parties have successfully positioned themselves as alternatives to Labour, particularly among younger voters and those disillusioned with traditional party politics.

In light of this, Labour has, in recent years, made efforts to rebuild and reinvigorate its membership base. Recent leaders, particularly Brendan Howlin and Ivana Bacik, have paid particular attention to this. The party has focused on reconnecting with trade unions, by advocating for issues that resonate with unions and union members, regarding wages, pension entitlements and paid parental leave. Meanwhile, the party has made efforts to attract younger members by addressing issues that resonate with that demographic, such as housing affordability, climate change and equality. Throughout its existence, Labour has emphasised the importance of grassroots activism and local organising as part of its strategy of renewal, and the party has emphasised its presence in local communities, particularly in urban areas, and encouraging members to take an active role in campaigning and advocacy.

It's worth noting that participation in political parties, religious congregations and clubs of all sorts has been declining steadily across the West for the past 50 years.³¹ In this respect, Ireland is no different. Nonetheless, the decline in membership has had significant implications for Labour's organisational strength. A smaller, less-engaged membership base makes it more challenging for the party to mobilise support during elections, raise funds and maintain an active presence in local communities. An example of this is the 2025 presidential election, where the party opted not to seek the nomination

of a Labour candidate, following the successful two terms of former Labour Minister Michael D. Higgins, given the limited campaign resources that are at the party's disposal. Getting this right will be crucial for the party's long-term survival and its ability to compete in an increasingly fragmented and competitive political landscape.

Summary

Political parties in Ireland generally do not publish their membership numbers, but we know that fewer and fewer people are joining political parties, including Labour. This is just part of a broad set of challenges the party faces, as it seeks to navigate a changing political environment. The shift of working-class support from Labour to Sinn Féin, combined with the party's struggle to attract younger voters, has significantly impacted Labour's electoral performances. Meanwhile, the decline in membership, particularly in the wake of the austerity years, has weakened the party's organisational strength and ability to attract attention, and thus, remain relevant. However, efforts to rebuild and modernise the party, with a focus on grassroots activism and re-engagement with traditional supporters, offer a path forward as Labour seeks to renew itself and regain relevance in Irish politics.

4

Key policies and political stance: Progressive politics

4.1 Social and economic policies

In keeping with social democratic tradition, the Irish Labour Party focuses on policies that reflect its commitment to social justice, equality and workers' rights. This includes those with respect to a wide range of social and economic issues, including access to housing, healthcare and childcare provision, progressive taxation, and labour rights. Below is a brief review of some of Labour's key policy priorities in 2025, many of which are shared across the social democratic parties covered in this series with varying degrees of emphasis.

Housing

Housing affordability and accessibility is an increasingly salient electoral issue and social challenge in Ireland, as in much of Europe, and is the most pressing political challenge of our time. The problem is especially acute in Dublin, which is one of the most expensive places in Europe to rent or buy a home.³² Labour has long advocated for affordable housing as a cornerstone of its social policy agenda. In opposition, the party emphasises the need for more active state

involvement in housing provision, including through the construction of public housing. Labour also places particular emphasis on the maintenance of rent controls to protect tenants, following the introduction of Rent Pressure Zone (RPZ) legislation to control rising rents in specific, high-demand areas in late 2016, following Labour's exit from government. The party has also called for increased security of tenure for renters, including measures to prevent arbitrary evictions and to ensure that tenants have stable, long-term housing options. Labour set out its plans for what it claimed to be a fully costed plan to build "*the 50,000 homes a year Ireland needs*" in advance of Budget 2024.³³ Relatedly, addressing homelessness has been a long-term priority for Labour. The party has advocated for a comprehensive approach to tackling homelessness, including increased funding for emergency accommodation and support services for those at risk of homelessness to complement long-term solutions such as greater investment in social housing.

Access to healthcare

It may surprise some readers to learn that Ireland is one of the only European countries without universal primary healthcare free at the point of use, and Ireland has one of the highest rates of private health insurance cover in the OECD, at around 47%.³⁴ Many citizens – around 42% of the population – do receive access to primary healthcare for free based on age, income or due to ill health.³⁵ However, for more than half of the population, a trip to the doctor typically costs €50-60 per visit. Labour has long advocated for the introduction of single-tier universal healthcare, arguing that access to healthcare should be based on need rather than the ability to pay. One of the most significant legacies of the much-maligned 2011-2016 government was the introduction in 2015 of a phased system of universal healthcare for children, currently

up to the age of 8, with the intention of increasing this at least to 16 in future years.³⁶

Labour is a vocal supporter of the Sláintecare plan, a cross-party initiative that was pioneered by former Minister for Primary Care Róisín Shortall, who left Labour in 2012 and helped found the Social Democrats in 2015. Sláintecare aims to reform the Irish healthcare system to make it more equitable and efficient, to expand primary care services that are free at the point of use, reduce waiting times and increase the provision of GP care for all citizens that is free at the point of use. Specifically, Labour is also among the most consistent advocates calling for increased investment in mental health services, particularly for young people.

Affordable childcare

Ireland has one of the lowest rates of publicly funded childcare in Europe, with most childcare providers operating in the private sector, albeit with the state providing some financial support.³⁷ The Labour force participation rate for women in 2024 was 61.4%, accounting for 41.9% of those in full-time employment and 67.3% in part-time employment, amounting to a doubling of the number of women in employment since 1998.³⁸ Over this time, Labour has called for greater state investment in childcare services, including increased subsidies to reduce the cost of childcare and the expansion of publicly funded facilities. An important achievement of the 2020-2024 Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael-Green government was the introduction of significantly increased support for parents to help meet the cost of childcare.³⁹ Alongside affordability, Labour has emphasised the importance of maintaining high-quality standards in childcare services. This includes ensuring that childcare workers receive adequate training and compensation, as well as the implementation of rigorous oversight and regulation

of childcare providers, particularly following a number of high-profile scandals across the sector.⁴⁰

Public services

Labour has been at the forefront of advocating for increased public investment in infrastructure, education and public services as a means of promoting economic growth and equality since the foundation of the state. The party routinely calls for investment in public transport, social housing and renewable energy, which are seen as crucial for building a sustainable and equitable economy. Predictably for a social democratic party, Labour's economic policies are ultimately rooted in the principle of economic equality and fairness. The party has championed measures to reduce income inequality, such as by increasing social welfare payments, expanding access to education and training, and promoting policies that support disadvantaged communities.

Economic policies

Ireland has one of the most progressive taxation systems among advanced economies, where those with higher incomes pay a greater share of taxes.⁴¹ Labour's approach to taxation is rooted in the belief that the wealthiest individuals and corporations should contribute more to public services and social welfare. Labour has also long proposed the introduction of or increases to wealth and inheritance taxes. The introduction of a property tax in 2013, under the aegis of the Troika bailout, was one of the most fraught policy interventions by that government. This progressive payment linked to the valuation of a property can rightly be regarded as an achievement by Labour, as a further example of the country's tendency towards progressive taxation.

Corporate taxation

Ireland's relatively low corporate tax rate, currently 12.5%, has been one of the cornerstones of the country's economic and industrial policy since the 1990s. Labour has consistently called for greater scrutiny and regulation of corporate tax arrangements to ensure that multinational companies pay their fair share. There is also a strong view within Labour – and across the parties of the left – that Ireland risks being over-reliant on tax receipts from a small number of potentially mobile US multinational corporations and that government should work to diversify the county's tax base to mitigate that vulnerability. This vulnerability has only grown since the return of Donald Trump to the White House in 2024 and his stated desire for US firms to carry out more of their activities in that country, including some activities – including in the fields of pharmaceuticals and technology – which currently take place in Ireland. This makes Labour's support for wealth and property taxes all the more relevant. Labour has also advocated for measures to combat tax avoidance and profit shifting, and for the adoption of OECD's new minimum effective corporate tax rate of 15%, which Ireland has subscribed to.

Work-life balance and workers' rights

In keeping with European peers, Labour advocates for policies that support work-life balance, including flexible working arrangements and parental leave policies that allow parents to balance work and family responsibilities more effectively. In the post-pandemic world, new ways of thinking about work and the divisions between work and home feel increasingly important to modern voters, putting Labour once again at the forefront of social change.

Labour has consistently supported the rights of workers to join and be represented by a union without discrimination. While the freedom

to associate and join unions is protected under the Irish Constitution, currently there is no right to collective bargaining in Ireland. Labour has campaigned for enhanced collective bargaining rights for decades, especially since the collapse of social partnership. In the Programme for Government, where the coalition parties set out their shared policy objective, in keeping with the requirements of the EU Adequate Minimum Wages Directive, the government initiated a public consultation in 2025 to gather input from citizens to inform the development of a national action plan to promote collective bargaining.⁴²

However, all parties, including Labour, must acknowledge the fact that around 7.5% of the working population are employed directly or indirectly by US multinational corporations, many of whom are antithetical to trade unions and do not engage with them directly. Thus, Labour and like-minded parties are working to introduce and maintain legislation to protect the terms and conditions of employment.

Labour's commitment to human rights in migration policy

One area of public policy that sets Ireland apart from most other countries in Western Europe relates to migration. Historically, Ireland was a country of outward migration right up until the end of the 20th century. Millions of Irish people left Ireland and settled in the likes of Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA, resulting in a significant Irish diaspora spread around the world. Ireland became a country of considerable inward migration only over the past 20 years, since the Eastern enlargement of the EU raised barriers to entry, and as the Irish economy developed rapidly and created the need for labour across all parts of the economy. As of 2024, over 15% of the Irish population were citizens of other countries, including more than 110,000 people from Ukraine since the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022.⁴³

The Irish Labour Party has consistently supported pro-migration and pro-integration policies, aligning with its broader commitment to social justice, equality and human rights. Labour supports creating clear and accessible pathways to citizenship for migrants who seek to integrate into Irish society.⁴⁴ The party has advocated for reforms to naturalisation processes to ensure that long-term residents, including those with strong ties to Ireland, can gain citizenship and fully participate in Irish life. The party has argued that migration is a normal and well-documented part of life on Earth and that it enriches the cultural fabric of Ireland while helping address demographic and labour market shortages, including in key sectors like healthcare, technology and education. Labour has been particularly vocal in supporting the rights of asylum seekers and refugees, calling for a fair and humane asylum process, advocating for timely and transparent procedures that respect the dignity of those seeking refuge in Ireland. Labour has also criticised the Direct Provision system, the state's programme that houses asylum seekers, for its often-poor conditions and lengthy processing times and has called for its reform or replacement. In 2021, in keeping with Labour policy, the Fianna Fáil-Green government pledged to end Direct Provision by the end of 2024, which would see it replaced with a new International Protection Support Service *"that would be run on a not-for-profit basis and centred on human rights"*,⁴⁵ although this deadline has been missed and the system remains in place at the time of writing.

Politically, while Ireland remains one of the only EU countries (alongside Malta) without an anti-migrant, anti-system or anti-EU sentiment within its parliamentary politics, migration is an increasingly contested political issue, with a high level of salience especially in urban settings, where a handful of local councillors were elected in 2024 on a platform that was explicitly anti-migration. There have also been a small number of high-profile demonstrations in rural settings,

typically in opposition to hotels and other facilities being used to accommodate international protection applicants.⁴⁶ Ultimately, Labour believes that successful integration is key to building a cohesive society where all individuals, regardless of their origin, can thrive, and support a humane and well-organised system of international protection that accounts for the needs of both applicants and communities. Thus, Labour has called for comprehensive integration strategies that include access to education, language training, employment opportunities and community engagement.

Labour has long recognised the potentially transformative role that education plays in a just society. Recognising this central role of education in promoting integration, Labour has advocated for increased support for language training and education programmes tailored to the needs of migrants. This includes ensuring that schools are equipped to support students from diverse backgrounds and that adult migrants have access to language courses to help them integrate into the workforce and community.

Alongside its sister social democratic parties, Labour has also consistently pushed for strong anti-discrimination laws and policies to protect citizens and migrants from racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination. The party has supported initiatives that promote diversity and inclusion in the workplace, in schools and in public life.

Labour's pro-migration and pro-integration stance is part of its broader commitment to human rights and international solidarity. The party has supported Ireland's well-regarded development aid policy and its role in global initiatives to protect refugees and promote human rights, advocating for Ireland to meet its obligations under international law. This includes supporting international efforts to address the root causes of migration, such as conflict, poverty and climate change, and

advocating for Ireland to take a leading role in providing humanitarian assistance.

Community engagement and participation

Labour believes that successful integration requires the active participation of both migrants and host communities. The party has promoted initiatives that encourage community engagement, cultural exchange and mutual understanding. This includes supporting local projects that bring together migrants and long-established residents to foster relationships and build strong, inclusive communities. Labour also ran several candidates who were not born in Ireland in the 2024 local elections, with some success.⁴⁷

Balancing integration with social services

Seeking to strike the difficult balance that many European social democratic parties have failed to do, as part of its pro-integration agenda, Labour has emphasised the importance of ensuring that social services, such as healthcare, housing and education, are adequately funded to meet the needs of a growing and diverse population. The party has argued that successful integration requires investment in these services to prevent social tensions and ensure that all residents can access the support they need. Indeed, while Labour has maintained a strong pro-migration stance, the party has also recognised the need to address public concerns about migration, particularly in the context of economic uncertainty and housing shortages and long waiting times to access healthcare. Labour consistently calls for adequate resources to be allocated to support both migrants and host communities, and that adequate consultation takes place when possible.

The Irish Labour Party's stance on migration and integration reflects its commitment to building a fair, inclusive, successful and equitable

society. Labour has consistently supported pro-migration policies, advocating for humane processes and clear pathways to citizenship for eligible applicants. The party's pro-integration agenda emphasises the importance of social cohesion, having access to education, language support and anti-discrimination measures. By promoting these policies, Labour seeks to ensure that Ireland remains a welcoming and inclusive country, drawing inspiration from its own legacy of outward migration. However, the party also recognises the need to address public concerns and to ensure that social services are adequately supported to facilitate successful integration.

Summary

In summary, the Irish Labour Party's key policies in the 21st century reflect its enduring commitment to social justice, equality and workers' rights. On social issues, Labour has placed much emphasis on addressing Ireland's housing crisis, promoting universal healthcare, and making childcare more affordable and accessible. Economically, the party has championed progressive taxation, workers' rights, and investment in public services and infrastructure. The party is also in favour of a humane and equitable approach to migration and international protection. Despite the challenges it has faced, particularly in the wake of the austerity years, Labour continues to advocate for policies that aim to create a fairer and more equitable society in Ireland, albeit from opposition.

4.2 Position on European integration

The Irish Labour Party has evolved from a historical position of scepticism in relation to European integration, particularly during the

early years of Ireland's membership of the EEC in the 1970s, to being unambiguously pro-European, and one of the most vocal advocates for Ireland's place within the EU among all political parties in the country. Labour's initial scepticism was largely rooted in concerns about the downward pressure EEC membership could place on wages, as well as the impact it might have on Ireland's sovereignty. Labour's early concerns also focused on the potential impact of EEC policies on Ireland's large and well-organised agricultural sector, which was seen as vulnerable to competition from other larger, more productive European economies, including France. Additionally, there was apprehension that European integration might lead to a dilution of Ireland's social welfare state, as European economic policies at that time were perceived to prioritise market liberalisation over social protections. The party was also wary of the potential for European integration to undermine Ireland's stance of military neutrality. During the 1972 referendum to confirm EEC membership for Ireland, while Labour officially opposed EEC membership, there were significant internal divisions, and there was always important latent support within the party membership.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Labour's position towards Europe softened considerably, reflecting broader changes in both the party and the EU. The benefits of EEC (and later EU) membership, such as access to European markets, structural funds for regional development and improvements in living standards, became increasingly apparent. During the 1987 Single European Act referendum and vote on the Maastricht Treaty (1992) and Amsterdam Treaty (1998), Labour adopted a supportive stance, seeing them as opportunities to strengthen European cooperation and enhance Ireland's economic prospects.

Embracing social Europe

Labour's shift towards a devoutly pro-European stance was also influenced by the EU's growing emphasis on social policy, particularly with the adoption of the Social Chapter under the Maastricht Treaty, which aimed to protect workers' rights and promote social cohesion across Europe. As trade unions were losing ground and influence across Europe, the EU was repositioning itself to provide ways to protect and promote workers' rights, in keeping with core social democratic principles. As was the case with many social democratic parties, from the 1990s in particular, many within Irish Labour increasingly viewed the EU as an ally and a vehicle for advancing its agenda, particularly in the fight for full employment, as captured in the 2000 Lisbon Strategy. By the time of the second Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty in 2009,⁴⁸ Labour was firmly established as a pro-European party. The party argued the revised treaty would enhance the EU's democratic legitimacy and enable it to address global challenges more effectively. Labour's pro-European stance is ultimately driven by a belief that Ireland's future is best secured within a strong and united Europe. Notably, Ireland's development of progressive social policy over the past decades – addressed in some detail below – also tracks the country's EEC and then EU membership, and the opportunities to exchange with and learn from other European jurisdictions and peoples clearly fed into this process.

Current pro-European stance

The 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent European debt crisis further solidified Labour's pro-European stance and, despite the challenges posed by the EU-IMF bailout and its strict austerity measures, Labour continued to advocate for Ireland's place in the EU. The party argued that European solidarity was essential for economic

recovery and that the EU remained a crucial partner in addressing issues such as unemployment, social inequality and environmental sustainability.

Fast forward to 2020, and the UK's decision to leave the EU following the 2016 Brexit referendum would have a profound impact on Ireland, given the dense economic, social and kinship ties that exist between the two islands. While taking place in a different jurisdiction, Irish Labour was vocal in its opposition to the UK's Brexit campaign. The party, alongside most of the Irish political establishment, emphasised the importance of shared EU membership for the country's economic stability, ability to influence global affairs and to sustain the peace process in Northern Ireland. All parties in Ireland, including Labour, were vocal in advocating for the maintenance of an open border on the island of Ireland and for ensuring that Ireland's interests were protected in any negotiations or settlement that would follow the referendum.

Alignment with the European social democratic movement

Today, Labour continues to support deeper European integration, particularly in areas such as social policy, climate action and human rights. As with its peers in the PES and the S&D Group in the European Parliament, Labour advocates for a more democratic and accountable EU, for social policy initiatives such as the European Pillar of Social Rights; stronger social protections for workers' rights; greater investment in infrastructure; and a robust response to global challenges such as climate change, migration and state-backed violence.

While Labour's overall stance on European integration is in line with other social democratic parties, there are clear differences in approach too. For example, some social democratic parties in Europe, particularly in the Nordic countries, have been cautious about aspects

of European integration that they perceive as undermining national sovereignty or social welfare models. As above, having taken the view in the 1970s, before most of the Nordic member states had joined the EU, that the European project posed a risk to hard-fought labour rights and standards, Labour is now highly supportive of deeper integration when it comes to social policy. It's clear that for many of the most progressive areas of social policy in Ireland, ranging from anti-discrimination legislation to the promotion of workers' rights and combatting social exclusion, Labour and other progressive parties can achieve more by working with European partners than they could by themselves.

Despite the general alignment, Labour, like other social democratic parties, faces the challenge of addressing Euroscepticism within certain segments of the population. Ireland has not seen the rise of populist movements that have been seen across most of Europe and that are often critical of the EU. Elsewhere, this has forced social democratic parties to navigate complex political landscapes where pro-European policies must be balanced with the concerns of voters who can feel left behind by globalisation and European integration. In Ireland, the centre of gravity politically is pro-European, and even those parties that are sceptical tend to call for a reformed EU rather than for departure.

Summary

The Irish Labour Party's position on European integration has evolved from initial scepticism to a strongly pro-European stance in the 21st century. This shift reflects Labour's recognition of the benefits of EU membership for Ireland's economic and social development, as well as its belief in the EU as a platform for advancing social justice, workers' rights and environmental sustainability. Labour's current stance aligns

closely, for the most part, with that of other social democratic parties in Europe, particularly in its support for the promotion of social cohesion and the combatting of social exclusion.

4.3 Labour and Irish identity

The Labour party has had a disproportionate impact on modern Irish identity, particularly in relation to social justice, equality and workers' rights. From its foundation in 1912, Labour has positioned itself as the voice of the working class and a champion of the disadvantaged in society. In keeping with the experience of social democratic parties across Europe, this commitment to social justice has manifested in several key areas.

Welfare state development

Labour has been instrumental in the development of Ireland's welfare state and remains among its most vociferous advocates. Labour leader Ivana Bacik calls for the establishment of an "active state", one that intervenes in the lives of citizens.⁴⁹ Throughout its history, the party has pushed for the expansion of social welfare programmes that provide support for the unemployed, the elderly, and low-income individuals and families.

Healthcare

An area where Labour has had a profound impact on Irish life and society is with respect to healthcare. Ireland currently has a two-tier health system. The party has long argued that access to healthcare should not be determined by income, and it has supported the creation of a single-tier health system where everyone can receive care based on need. This emphasis on healthcare as a right has contributed to

a broader understanding of social justice in Ireland, where the state has a responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of all its citizens.

Equality

Labour's commitment to equality has been a defining feature of its contribution to modern Irish identity. The party has been at the forefront of campaigns for gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights and anti-discrimination measures, helping to transform Ireland into a more inclusive society. The party has supported legislation aimed at closing the gender pay gap, increasing women's representation in politics and public life, and combating gender-based violence. Labour's advocacy has helped to embed gender equality into the fabric of Irish society. However, while Labour has done well to promote female candidates and female participation in politics, currently only two of its 11 TDs are women.

Ireland's social transformation – a Labour party achievement?

Labour has contributed to the development of modern Irish identity, which embraces diversity and promotes human rights. The country has been transformed from a socially conservative, relatively poor, country up to the 1980s and 1990s, into one of the most socially progressive and economically prosperous countries in the world. Labour has been at the centre of the most significant progressive changes that the country has experienced. Examples include the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993, the introduction of divorce in 1995, legalisation to allow for same-sex marriage in 2015 and the liberalisation of abortion rights in 2018. These reforms represent a dramatic shift in a country that, historically, had been deeply influenced and shaped by conservative Catholic values. In the decades following independence,

the Catholic Church had a direct role in the running of most of the country's hospitals and schools and had an enormous influence over social mores and attitudes, including with regard to matters of family and sexuality. Today, while Ireland is still a predominately Catholic country, with almost 80% of the population identifying as Catholic at the last census,⁵⁰ the rates of weekly mass attendance have fallen significantly to around 27% in 2020 from as high as 91% in 1975.⁵¹ Thus, while Ireland remains identifiably Catholic, the role of the Church in people's lives is greatly reduced and is essentially optional, and Labour has been a leading voice in advocating for the progressive modern Ireland which has evolved to replace that which went before.

The legalisation of same-sex marriage in Ireland was a landmark moment in the country's history, which was introduced while Labour was in government. In 2015, Ireland became the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage by popular vote, with 62% of the electorate voting in favour of the constitutional amendment. The Labour Party was a staunch advocate for marriage equality for decades leading up to the vote and played a pivotal role in bringing the issue to the forefront of national discourse. As part of the coalition government with Fine Gael, Labour pushed for the holding of the referendum and was instrumental in the campaign for a "Yes" vote. Labour leaders and members, including then Tánaiste Joan Burton and Minister for Equality and current MEP Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, were especially prominent voices in the campaign. The marriage equality referendum was passed in the final year of the 2011-2016 austerity government but marked the culmination of a decades-long campaign in which Labour was the most prominent and consistent voice. The success of the marriage equality referendum marked a significant victory for Labour and reinforced the party's reputation as a champion of social justice.

The Eighth Amendment of the Irish Constitution, introduced in 1983, effectively prohibited abortion in almost all circumstances in Ireland by giving equal rights to the life of the mother and the unborn child. For decades, this amendment was a source of significant controversy and division across society. The campaign to repeal the Eighth Amendment concluded in the 2018 referendum, where 66.4% of voters chose to remove the amendment and allow for the legalisation of abortion up to 12 weeks of pregnancy, with exceptions for later terminations under certain circumstances. The Labour Party was a key player in the campaign and the legislative groundwork for the amendment was laid by the 2011-2016 government. Labour had long supported the repeal of the Eighth Amendment, arguing that the existing law was harmful to women and denied them the right to make decisions about their own bodies. Labour politicians, including the current leader Ivana Bacik, were vocal in their support for repealing the Eighth Amendment and played active roles in the campaign. Labour also pushed for legislation to ensure that, following the referendum, abortion services would be safe, legal and accessible.

The repeal of the Eighth Amendment and the subsequent legalisation of abortion represented a profound shift in Irish society, arguably reflecting a broader, inexorable move towards secularism and the recognition of women's rights. For Labour, this victory was a validation of its long-standing commitment to gender equality and women's rights, further establishing the party as a progressive force in Irish politics.

Labour's role in promoting social reforms has had a broad impact on public discourse in Ireland and helped to shift the Overton window – that is to say, the range of public policies that are deemed acceptable to the mainstream population – on countless occasions, forcing many progressive issues onto the political mainstream in Ireland. By championing progressive causes, Labour has helped to shift the national

conversation towards issues of equality, human rights and social justice, encouraging other political parties and civil society groups to engage with these important topics. By championing these causes, Labour has contributed to a more inclusive and egalitarian Ireland, reflecting the party's core values of equality, social justice and human rights.

While Labour's involvement in these social reforms has reinforced its progressive credentials, the party has also faced challenges in translating these successes into sustained electoral support. The party is also criticised for focusing attention on social policy to the detriment of economic policy. As Ireland continues to evolve socially and politically, Labour will need to build on these achievements while continuing to advocate for policies that resonate with a diverse and changing electorate.

Summary

The Labour Party has played a pivotal role in shaping modern Irish identity and society, particularly through its advocacy for social justice, equality and workers' rights. This includes the movements to decriminalise homosexuality, marriage equality and the right to choose. By championing these causes, Labour has helped to transform Ireland into a gradually more inclusive and equitable society. Labour's legacy in these areas continues to influence the political and social landscape of Ireland, ensuring that the principles of fairness, equality and justice remain central to discourse in Ireland.

Relations with Northern Ireland – one island, two jurisdictions

It should be noted that one peculiarity of the Irish political context is the existence of two jurisdictions on the one island, with the Republic of Ireland making up the majority of the island to the south

and west, and Northern Ireland, a constituent part of the UK, forming the approximately north-eastern quarter of the island. While the Irish Labour Party now operates exclusively within the Republic of Ireland, having previously run candidates at elections in Northern Ireland right up to the 1980s, it maintains close ties with its sister party, and fellow PES affiliate, Northern Ireland's Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), which was founded in 1970. All parties in the Republic of Ireland (including Labour) are at least nominally in favour of a United Ireland, albeit to varying degrees; that is to say, they support the prospect of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland being united in one jurisdiction. Clearly, all political parties on the island of Ireland must also navigate the outworkings, complexities and psychology of the post-Brexit era, including in relation to the status of the border on the island of Ireland, and Northern Ireland's constitutional status under the Windsor framework, as we shall see.

Today, Irish Labour and the SDLP do not compete for votes, as they operate in separate electoral jurisdictions, and the party faithful often lend their support to one another at election time. Both parties share a broad social democratic, progressive, pro-European vision and policy agenda. Both parties also share attachments and pay homage to the same historical political figures, such as the rebel leader James Connolly (more on this below) and John Hume, the constitutional nationalist leader and one of the founders of the SDLP, and both parties are vocal proponents of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA) and its institutions.

The Irish Labour Party has maintained a consistent and nuanced stance on Northern Ireland, emphasising the importance of peace, cooperation and respect for the diverse identities on the island of Ireland. As with most of its policy offerings, Labour's approach has been shaped by its commitment to social justice, human rights and the

peaceful resolution of conflict. In the context of Brexit and its aftermath, Labour has been vocal regarding the need to protect the B/GFA.

Support for the GFA

The 1998 B/GFA was a landmark achievement in the peace process in Northern Ireland, bringing an end to the decades-long period of conflict commonly referred to as “The Troubles”. Labour has been a consistent supporter of the B/GFA, viewing it as the foundation for lasting peace and stability in Northern Ireland and across these islands. The agreement, which established the power-sharing government in Northern Ireland and which set out provisions for cross-border cooperation with the Republic of Ireland and with Great Britain, has been central to the vision shared by most political parties, including Labour, for a peaceful and cooperative settlement in Northern Ireland. Labour’s stance on Northern Ireland consistently emphasises the party’s commitment to the maintenance of peace and reconciliation. The party has advocated for continued dialogue between political and community representatives in Northern Ireland. The greatest threat to the B/GFA in its more than quarter of a century in existence was brought about by Brexit, particularly in relation to the questions it raised about the administration of the border on the island of Ireland.

Irish Labour was a vocal opponent of Brexit, recognising the potential dangers it posed to the stability of Northern Ireland and the peace process. The party argued that Brexit could undermine the B/GFA by disrupting cross-border cooperation. Under the B/GFA, all Northern Ireland citizens are entitled to obtain an Irish passport as well as or instead of a British one. As of 2021, more than 600,000 people in Northern Ireland held an Irish passport, representing a third of the population.⁵² In keeping with this, Labour has consistently expressed concerns about the impact of Brexit on the rights of citizens in Northern

Ireland, particularly those who identify as Irish and European. Labour joined with other parties to call for any Brexit deal to include guarantees that there would be no attempt to introduce a hard border on the island of Ireland. Labour supported the “backstop” arrangement in the UK’s original Withdrawal Agreement, which aimed to prevent the prospect of a hard border by keeping Northern Ireland aligned with certain EU regulations.⁵³ The backstop was ultimately replaced by the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland (commonly referred to as the “Northern Ireland Protocol”), which forms part of the final Brexit withdrawal agreement, and essentially keeps Northern Ireland within the EU’s single market for goods as well as within the UK’s own internal market, making it “*the world’s most exciting economic zone*”, according to then UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.⁵⁴

The Northern Ireland Protocol was designed in large part to avoid the introduction of a hard border on the island of Ireland – a prospect which anyone with knowledge of the situation knows is a logistical and political non-starter. While this means that Northern Ireland would remain in the EU’s single market for goods, the rest of the UK would diverge from EU regulations. Labour has supported the protocol as a necessary compromise to protect the B/GFA. Labour has consistently called for pragmatic solutions to address the concerns of those unionists⁵⁵ in Northern Ireland who see the protocol as something that undermines their entitlement to identify fully as British and with the UK.

Relating to a broader vision for Northern Ireland, Labour has consistently advocated for the protection of human rights and equality across the island of Ireland. Notably, Northern Ireland and the Republic diverge considerably on a range of social policy matters. Labour has supported the extension of marriage equality and greater abortion rights to Northern Ireland, where access to both are highly curtailed compared to in the Republic. Labour has also been among the most

vocal proponents of the full implementation of the rights and equality provisions of the B/GFA, including measures to address the needs of marginalised communities and to promote social cohesion.

Along with most parties in Ireland, Labour has emphasised the importance of cross-border cooperation, particularly in areas such as health, education and infrastructure. The party views this cooperation as essential for building a shared future on the island, where the benefits of peace and prosperity are enjoyed by all. Crucially, there are opportunities for development and improvement in both directions. Despite some of the longest waiting lists in Europe, people in Northern Ireland are covered by the UK's National Health Service (NHS) and can access healthcare, including primary care, for free at the point of use. In the Republic, the public health system is still not universal in application, as discussed, with swathes of the population required to pay out of pocket for primary healthcare. Labour places the introduction of universal healthcare for everyone on the island of Ireland at the centre of its programme.⁵⁶

Labour's approach to Northern Ireland has been characterised by a respect for the different identities and traditions that exist in the region. The party has called for a balanced approach that recognises the rights and aspirations of both nationalist and unionist communities. Labour also supports the principle of consent, as enshrined in the B/GFA, which states that any change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland can only occur with the consent of a majority of its people.

Despite the geographical proximity and relatively small scale of the two jurisdictions that coexist on the island of Ireland, politics and society in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are less intimately associated with one another than one might expect from the outside looking in. In the interest of maintaining peace and prosperity, more can be done to promote social cohesion across the island. Labour is

uniquely well placed to do so, along with its colleagues in the SDLP and other like-minded parties. It's notable too that ICTU, the trade union centre, is an all-island organisation with members on both sides of the Irish border. Given the historically close ties between Labour and the trade union movement, this gives the party a particular vantage with respect to politics and society in Northern Ireland and on the future of life on the island.

4.4 Geopolitics and neutrality

The Irish Labour Party supports Ireland's policy of military neutrality, which dates nominally from 1939, when the country did not participate directly in World War II.⁵⁷ Over 70,000 men from the Republic of Ireland fought in the war, mostly in the ranks of the British army. Today, neutrality, as understood in the Irish context, involves the avoidance of military alliances and the commitment to resolving international conflicts through diplomacy and peaceful means. Ireland has an unbroken track record of involvement in UN peacekeeping missions since 1958. Labour has championed this stance, arguing that Ireland's neutrality allows it to play a constructive role on the global stage as a mediator and advocate for peace. However, considering Russia's full-scale, illegal invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which brings war to Europe once more, Ireland's neutral stance has been subject to debate and scrutiny. The move by Finland and Sweden to join NATO, ending those countries' policy of neutrality, leaves Ireland alongside only Austria, Cyprus and Malta as the only militarily neutral EU countries.

Ireland also has one of the lowest rates of military investment among developed countries, standing at around 0.2% of GDP in 2025.⁵⁸ Even before the onset of Russia's war in Ukraine, successive Irish governments had committed to increasing funding to the military.

In 2022, in the weeks before Russia's full-scale invasion on 24 February, a Commission that had been set up by the government to consider the future of the defence forces issued recommendations. The Commission outlined three options for the government with regard to military expenditure, ranging from "status quo" to "significant investment".⁵⁹ This report, along with Russia's war in Ukraine and Brexit, has helped to put security and defence matters, including Ireland's position of neutrality, firmly to the centre of public discourse. In the summer of 2023, following on from the Commission's report, the Department of Foreign Affairs convened a Public Consultation on International Security Policy,⁶⁰ which brought together experts over eight days at locations across the country to engage in debate and discussion on matters of security and defence. All citizens were invited to attend, either in person or remotely. A final report was prepared by Professor Louise Richardson, former Vice Chancellor of Oxford University and current President of the Carnegie Corporation.⁶¹ Little decisive change has occurred on the back of this, but the government has committed to increasing military investment. Fianna Fáil Taoiseach Micheal Martin, the 14th holder of the office, has pushed the limits of Ireland's policy of neutrality, stating expressly that Ireland is "militarily neutral" but not "politically neutral", and the country and its government have been unambiguously supportive of Ukraine in the war with Russia. As further evidence of the shift in attitudes with respect to neutrality, senior politicians, including Fine Gael Minister for Health Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, have called for an end to the "triple lock", which prevents defence force deployments of more than 12 without the consent of the cabinet, a vote of the Oireachtas (parliament) and a UN mandate. Carroll-MacNeill stated that "*We cannot be held by others. We must remove the triple lock and take charge of our own affairs and be held to account for own decisions*".⁶²

Throughout this period, Ireland has contributed actively to Ukraine's war effort by supporting the EU's training mission in Poland; providing consistent support for Ukraine's application to become a full member of the EU; and by hosting over 112,000 Ukrainian refugees across the country, amounting to around 2% of the population, one of the highest proportions of any European country.⁶³ The Irish Government has also funded non-lethal equipment to support the Ukrainian army, in keeping with the country's neutral stance. This has laid bare the delicate balance that the Irish Government must try to maintain between its policy of military neutrality and its support for a European ally.

Labour's historical commitment to neutrality

Ireland's policy of neutrality has been a cornerstone of its foreign policy for most of its independence. Ireland's position of neutrality has historically been as much about avoiding international entanglements and promoting peace, human rights and international cooperation as about distinguishing itself from the UK, especially in the decades following independence, where neutrality was seen by many as a mainstay of the fledgling state's sovereignty.

Ireland is not a member of NATO but is associated with the organisation through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme. Over decades, Labour has been among the parties most consistently opposed to any moves towards Ireland joining NATO or other military alliances. The party argues that such alliances are incompatible with Ireland's tradition of neutrality and would undermine the country's ability to act as an independent voice for peace and justice. Ireland's commitment to neutrality aside, there is no credible prospect of Ireland joining NATO given the country's low rate of military investment, which is far below what any alliance member would be expected to spend.

Aside from Ireland's documented track record in UN deployments, Ireland participates in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and other initiatives aimed at enhancing European security and defence capabilities. Ireland's engagement includes participation in joint procurement, capability development projects and crisis management operations, all while respecting its position of neutrality. In light of the ever-changing geopolitical environment, it's clear that Ireland is increasing its commitment to joint EU security activities. Notably, Lieutenant General Seán Clancy, the Chief of Staff of the Irish defence forces, was elected as Chairman of the European Union Military Committee in 2025, the first Irish person to hold the position.⁶⁴

While remaining aligned to the country's long-standing position of neutrality, Labour acknowledges the changing security environment in Europe and is wary of what can be seen as the growing push towards militarism in the EU. Labour supports a referendum to enshrine neutrality in the Irish Constitution, as well as the retention of the triple lock discussed above. Labour does foresee Irish engagement in appropriate EU defence cooperation through structures like the CSDP and Permanent Structured Cooperation, provided neutrality is not infringed, in keeping with its commitment to peacekeeping, non-aggression and peaceful resolution to conflicts.

Of particular interest to Ireland is maritime security, given the country's position as an island on the edge of Europe, and as the country's Exclusive Economic Zone and territorial waters make up a space some seven times the size of the country's landmass. This has been brought into sharper relief in the context of Brexit, given the introduction of a customs border in the Irish sea between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Great Britain and the EU, including Ireland. The shifting dynamics in the North Atlantic amid the Trump II presidency raises concerns too regarding the reliability of the USA as a security

partner. Labour has called for increased investment in the Irish Naval Service, in particular to ensure that Ireland can effectively monitor and protect its territorial waters to address issues such as illegal fishing, drug trafficking and environmental protection.

The changing global landscape

The evolving nature of global security challenges in recent years, including digital warfare, cyber threats and state-backed interference, has changed Ireland's security context. In the past, geography and neutrality played a role in Ireland keeping out of most international conflicts, but this is no longer the case. In 2021, the country was visited by a cyberattack against its health service, which originated in Russia.⁶⁵ This attack precipitated enormous disruption for many public services, including hospital appointments, the issuing of birth certificates and passport applications. However, notably, despite the very real (albeit non-violent) impact of this Russian state-backed aggression, the threat perception in Ireland with regard to Russia remains far lower than in countries closer to the conflict. Meanwhile, the protection of Ireland's subsea cable infrastructure, which relates to the activities of the many US and other multinational corporations, also raises major questions about Ireland's ability to defend itself militarily and has helped to bring the debates around security and defence into the centre of public discourse.

While maintaining its commitment to neutrality, Labour has called for Ireland to adapt to the new geopolitical realities, including by investing in cybersecurity, enhancing intelligence capabilities and cooperating with international partners to combat global threats. Labour also supports international cooperation to establish norms and regulations governing cyberspace, emphasising the need to protect democratic institutions, critical infrastructure and individual privacy. In keeping with democratic

tradition, Labour also stresses the importance of balancing security needs with the protection of civil liberties, and the party supports strong data protection laws in the interest of individual rights.

Regarding the war in Ukraine, Labour, alongside all mainstream parties in Ireland, has consistently condemned Russia's aggression and illegal invasion, viewing it as a violation of international law and an assault on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, a European partner. The party has called for a robust international response, including sanctions against Russia and support for the Ukrainian people by providing humanitarian aid, refuge for those fleeing the conflict and support for the EU's Training Mission for Ukraine. Labour also vocally supports Ukraine's candidacy for the EU. In Ireland, this position of unambiguous support for Ukraine and opposition to Russia is perhaps less complicated than elsewhere in Europe, given that there is no support for Russia's war within the Irish Parliament and political context. Two former MEPs, the left-populist Clare Daly and Mick Wallace, went furthest in linking Russia's invasion with NATO provocation, and paid for it at the ballot box in 2024 by being roundly rejected by the electorate.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Ireland's consistent, unwavering and explicit political support for Ukraine's EU candidacy and the support afforded to Ukrainian refugees in the country is also partly intended to supplement the limited support the country can provide to Ukraine militarily.

4.5 Labour's international relations

The EU

Labour's relationship with the EU is characterised by its strong pro-European stance, as discussed above. The party sees the EU as a key platform for advancing Ireland's interests and for promoting peace, stability and social justice in Europe and beyond. Labour supports



deeper EU integration, particularly in areas such as human rights, environmental protection and economic equality, while also advocating for Ireland's continued stance of military neutrality. This departs radically from the early decades of Irish membership of the then EEC from the 1970s, when many in Labour were sceptical of Ireland's involvement. Today, Irish Labour is actively involved at the EU level through PES and the S&D Group at the European Parliament, having elected an MEP in 2024 for the first time in a decade.

The USA

As with all established parties in Ireland, Labour has supported a strong and constructive relationship between Ireland and the USA, especially recognising the legacy of the Irish in America and of the USA as a key economic partner. However, while acknowledging the important links of culture and economics, there are, of course, those in Labour who have criticised the USA over matters of human rights, democracy and environmental sustainability throughout history. Today, figures in Labour and across the political landscape have accepted the radical change in tone and relations with the USA, following the high point of President Joe Biden (2020-2024), who identified strongly with his Irish heritage. This makes Labour's commitment to the European project and to the rules-based multilateral system all the more relevant.

International solidarity

Ireland places a considerable emphasis on its overseas development activities and on achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals.⁶⁷ The OECD describes Ireland as *"a staunch multilateralist, a good partner for civil society and a promoter of development education"*.⁶⁸ In 2023, Ireland spent around 0.38% of GNI, or around €776.5 million, on its aid budget⁶⁹ and remains committed to the UN target of 0.7% of GNI by

2030, making Ireland one of the only European countries to increase its aid budget amid the rapid increase in defence investment across the continent. Labour has consistently been at the forefront in advocating for international solidarity with developing nations. The party supports increasing Ireland's foreign aid budget. The party links its commitment to global justice with the issue of climate change, arguing that Ireland has a responsibility to support vulnerable nations that are disproportionately affected by climate-related disasters. The party advocates for Ireland to take a leading role in international efforts to combat climate change and to support developing countries in their transition to sustainable energy sources. Regrettably, Ireland is ranked among the worst EU countries in terms of greenhouse gas emissions⁷⁰ with the agriculture sector being the single largest contributor to the overall emissions, at 37.7%.⁷¹ Thus, while Labour, in government and opposition, can be credited with the introduction of many important developments in social and public policy in general, the party's achievements when it comes to sustainability and environmental protection cannot rank among its greatest achievements.

Ireland and Palestine

An area of Ireland's foreign policy that can generate interest internationally is the longstanding solidarity between Ireland and the Palestinian people. This affinity has been brought to global attention in recent times given the atrocities that have taken place against the Palestinian people following the heinous and barbaric attacks by Hamas in Israel on 7 October 2023, which killed over 1,000 people with some 200 taken hostage. Israel's response against the Palestinian people has resulted in the deaths of over 60,000, the death or injury of over 50,000 children,⁷² and the destruction of over 90% of all residential homes in the Gaza strip, affecting some 436,000 dwellings.⁷³ In the

EU context, Ireland has remained a staunch and vocal opponent to the nature and scale of Israel's war in Gaza, calling for an end to the violence, the peaceful resolution of the conflict and the return of the remaining Israeli hostages being detained by Hamas.

Ireland has maintained a diplomatic representation in Tel Aviv in Israel since 1996, and in Ramallah in the Palestine Territories since 2000. Israel also established its embassy in Ireland in 1996 but left in 2024 in protest to Ireland's opposition to Israel's war in Gaza.⁷⁴ The Palestinian Authority has maintained a diplomatic representation in Ireland since 2001, which was upgraded to an embassy in 2024 following Ireland's recognition of Palestinian statehood. In 1980, Ireland was among the first EEC member states to endorse the establishment of a Palestinian state. Labour has long advocated for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, advocating for the establishment of an independent Palestinian State, and for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. The party has consistently called for an end to the blockade of Gaza and for Israel to comply with international law. Labour also supports international efforts to hold both Israeli and Palestinian leaders accountable for actions that undermine peace and violate human rights. Polls consistently show the Irish public to be supportive of sanctions against Israel because of their actions against the Palestinians.⁷⁵

The historical ties of solidarity between Ireland and the Palestinian peoples are more than a century old and are linked to factors including the two countries' shared history of occupation, sectarian conflict and experience of British colonialism. Historically, these ties have been strongest on the left of Irish politics, including within the Labour Party. However, one feature of the ongoing immiseration of the people of Gaza that resonates with a broad and inclusive Irish audience relates to the weaponisation of hunger and the socially constructed nature of the famine being caused by the Israeli blockade of the Gaza strip. This

prevents millions of men, women and children from accessing food and medicine,⁷⁶ leading the UN to officially declare a famine in Gaza in August 2025.⁷⁷ A critical juncture in Irish history is the Irish Famine (1845-1850) following the failure of the potato crop on the island, the main staple food for the population of 8 million. This famine was sustained in part by British policy in Ireland, characterised by neglect and the subordination of humanitarianism to perceived British national interests elsewhere in the world. This period resulted in the death or emigration of around half of the Irish population. This depopulation sees Ireland with the unenviable record as the only Western country whose population in 2025 is below what it was in 1840.

The parallels between Ireland's legacy of hunger and experience of wilful neglect by its neighbour in the 19th century, and the situation currently being experienced in Gaza given the Israeli blockade, has allowed the plight of the Palestinians to remain at the centre of public discourse in Ireland. Notably, some supporters of Israel, including the country's Foreign Minister, Gideon Saar,⁷⁸ has called Ireland's support for the people of Palestine "antisemitic", despite the lack of any empirical or other evidence to support this. Notably, these remarks coincide with the passage of the Occupied Territories Bill, also known as the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill, through the Irish Parliament. This is a proposed law that aims to ban trade between Ireland and Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian territories, which are illegal under international law.⁷⁹ Labour has sponsored the bill at each stage and is one of its most vocal proponents.

There is essentially no organised political support in Ireland for Israel's war in Gaza, and opposition to the bill, including from the government, typically revolves around the practical implications of the proposed law, including its compatibility with EU law, and the question of whether both goods and services would be included within its ambit.

In any case, the volume of trade between Ireland and Israeli settlements is very small, amounting to around €500,000 in goods per year,⁸⁰ and the bill is almost entirely symbolic. This is a good example of Ireland seeking to influence matters diplomatically, in keeping with its position of neutrality, an approach that is historically supported by Labour.

Ireland's draft Occupied Territories Bill coheres with the ongoing discussions at the EU level around the possible suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, following a review undertaken by the EU's External Action Service, published in July 2025, which found indications that Israel was in breach of its human rights obligations under Article 2 of Association Agreement.⁸¹ Ireland, alongside the likes of Spain, had pushed for such a finding for more than a year, and more member states, including the likes of Finland, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and Sweden, have toughened their position on Israel over its war in Gaza during this time.

Summary

The Irish Labour Party's views on global politics and neutrality reflect its commitment to peace, justice and international cooperation. Labour has consistently supported Ireland's policy of neutrality, while advocating for Ireland to play a constructive role in global affairs through diplomacy and peacekeeping. Figures associated with the Labour Party have gone on to play important roles within international organisations, including former President of Ireland Mary Robinson, who served as UN High Commissioner for Refugees (1997-2002) as well in a range of other UN roles, and former Labour leader Eamon Gilmore, who served as EU Special Envoy for the Colombian Peace Process (2015-2019) and for Human Rights (2019-2024). The Labour Party values relations with global powers like the USA but has been willing to criticise policies that conflict with the party's principles. Perhaps this was easier in the

past, when Ireland, along with other small states, could afford to remain aloof from international affairs, largely by dint of geography. The fallout from the Hamas attacks against Israel on 7 October 2023 and the war in Gaza which followed is perhaps the most obvious example of international policy discourse that Ireland now seeks to contribute to. On global security issues, including digital warfare, maritime security, and conflicts such as those in Ukraine and Gaza, Labour has emphasised the importance of the maintenance of international law, humanitarian aid and protections of human rights. By maintaining its commitment to neutrality and advocating for justice, Labour continues to help shape Ireland's role as a small nation dedicated to peace and human rights.

5

Current challenges and future prospects for the Irish Labour Party

Having presented some of the main features, milestones and policies of the Irish Labour Party, we now turn to the road ahead for Ireland's oldest political party. It's clear that Labour has faced many considerable challenges, some of which were potentially existential in nature. It's also clear that Labour has been at the forefront of some of the most significant social and progressive changes in Irish history, both in government and from opposition. This has shown Labour to be consistently willing to lead, govern and take tough decisions. What is clear is that Labour has endured and, following a challenging decade, has begun to mount a revival following elections in 2024, which it can build on in the years to come.

5.1 Electoral challenges

Labour faces a major challenge in regaining electoral relevance. The party is still marked by its time in government in 2011-2016, when it sought to moderate the full impact of austerity amid the country's Troika bailout and is no longer the main left-wing force in Irish politics. Labour now faces competition from other left-wing and progressive parties, including Sinn Féin, the Greens and the Social Democrats, as well as smaller parties

and independents, which have successfully attracted many of Labour's traditional voters and eroded the party's traditional support base. To put it starkly, Labour can no longer claim to be the primary voice for workers and those advocating for social justice and equality in Ireland. As well as undermining the party's capacity to act politically, it has undermined confidence within the party and among its supporters.

The political dynamics in Ireland have also shifted. Ireland is a modern, progressive, prosperous society. Voters in general are becoming less loyal to traditional party affiliations and trade union membership is falling. The traditional parties of government, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, collectively attracted around 40% of support in the 2024 general election. The electorate is increasingly willing to support parties outside of the traditional mainstream, so there is much higher voter volatility between elections. This shift has benefited parties like Sinn Féin, the Social Democrats and PBP, all of which have positioned themselves as more radical and uncompromising alternatives to Labour. These parties have capitalised on the dissatisfaction with Labour's role in the austerity government and its perceived shift towards the political centre. None of these parties have yet been tested in government in Ireland, and it not possible to say what choices they would have made had they been in government, a point which is recognised by at least part of the electorate. However, Labour has held its own at the local level, mounted a sustained recovery at the national level and, crucially, returned an MEP to the S&D Group for the first time in a decade. Taken together, there is room for optimism within Labour, but not complacency, when it comes to the party's electoral prospects looking ahead.

The rise of Sinn Féin and other challengers

Sinn Féin is a nationalist party that operates on the left wing of Irish politics. The party is in the Confederal Group of the European

United Left (GUE) in the European Parliament and has been described, including by Labour leader Ivana Bacik, as left populist.⁸² Sinn Féin's rise has been one of the most significant developments in Irish politics in modern times. Having first elected a single TD in 1997, the party made its main breakthrough in 2011 with 14 seats. Since then, the party has grown steadily to be the main force in opposition, having overtaken Labour as the main party of opposition on the left. As of the 2024 election, Sinn Féin has 39 seats, making it the second-largest party in the Dáil (see Table 4). It is also the third-largest party in local government (see Table 5) and elected two of Ireland's 14 MEPs (see Table 6).

Table 4. General election results for the main parties, 2011-2024.

| | 2011 | 2016 | 2020 | 2024 |
|-------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Fianna Fáil | 17.4% (20 seats) | 24.3% (44 seats) | 22.2% (38 seats) | 21.9% (48 seats) |
| Fine Gael | 36.1% (76 seats) | 25.5% (50 seats) | 20.9% (35 seats) | 20.8% (38 seats) |
| Labour | 19.4% (37 seats) | 6.6% (7 seats) | 4.4% (6 seats) | 4.7% (11 seats) |
| Sinn Féin | 9.9% (14 seats) | 13.8% (23 seats) | 24.5% (37 seats) | 19% (39 seats) |

Table 5. Local election results for the main parties, 2009-2024.

| | 2009 | 2014 | 2019 | 2024 |
|-------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Fianna Fáil | 25.4% (407 seats) | 25.5% (267 seats) | 26.9% (279 seats) | 22.9% (248 seats) |
| Fine Gael | 32.2% (556 seats) | 24.0% (235 seats) | 25.3% (255 seats) | 23.0% (245 seats) |
| Labour | 14.7% (231 seats) | 7.2% (51 seats) | 5.7% (57 seats) | 5.3% (56 seats) |
| Sinn Féin | 7.4% (127 seats) | 15.2% (159 seats) | 9.5% (81 seats) | 11.8% (102 seats) |

Table 6. European election results for the main parties, 2009-2024.

| | 2009 | 2014 | 2019 | 2024 |
|-------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Fianna Fáil | 24.1% (3 seats) | 22.3% (1 seat) | 16.6% (2 seats) | 20.4% (4 seats) |
| Fine Gael | 29.1% (4 seats) | 22.3% (4 seats) | 29.6% (5 seats) | 20.8% (4 seats) |
| Labour | 13.9% (3 seats) | 5.3% (0 seats) | 3.1% (0 seats) | 3.4% (1 seat) |
| Sinn Féin | 11.2% (0 seats) | 19.5% (3 seats) | 11.7% (1 seat) | 11.1% (2 seats) |

Sinn Féin has successfully positioned itself as the leading voice of opposition, particularly against austerity and inequality. Sinn Féin promotes social justice and anti-establishment sentiment, which has resonated strongly with voters who feel left behind by globalisation and neoliberal policies, many of whom would have voted historically for Labour. Sinn Féin now presents itself as the alternative to the established parties, which Labour had previously done.

As well as appealing to voters who became disillusioned with Labour following the austerity government of 2011-2016, the UK's withdrawal has also played a role in the rise in support for Sinn Féin, as discussed. Brexit has raised questions about the constitutional status of Northern Ireland and brought the debate around Irish unity to the centre of Irish public discourse. Sinn Féin puts Irish unity at the centre of its programme, which resonates strongly with elements within the public who support Irish unity. Clearly, the rise of Sinn Féin represents one of the major challenges to Labour's electoral prospects.

As before, Sinn Féin has been characterised as left populist. Populism is a contested concept, but Cas Mudde sees populism as representing a political programme that considers society to be separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups – “the pure

people” versus “the corrupt elite” – and argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.⁸³ By that token, Sinn Féin passes the populist test. However, unlike many other parties in Europe that earn the populist label, including the likes of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, the Rassemblement National in France or the Reform Party in the UK, Sinn Féin sits squarely on the left of the political spectrum and has more in common with the likes of fellow GUE members Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece. At the apex of the party at least, Sinn Féin is in favour of the rights of migrants and of progressive social policies, including around the rights of LGBTQIA+ people. The party is overall highly critical of the status quo in Irish politics, and Labour is often dismissed by it as being part of the establishment.

Alongside Sinn Féin, there are other parties of the left who contribute to Labour’s electoral challenges. On the centre-left, the Green Party offers a similar progressive agenda to Labour, albeit one that puts greater emphasis on environmental matters. The Greens suffer from the same problem as Labour does, having served in government for the first time directly before the 2011-2016 government, when the Troika bailout was agreed. The party also made up part of the 2020-2024 government, after which the party lost all but one of its 12 seats in the 2024 general election. The Greens, like Labour, have gone into government and have suffered electorally for failing to deliver fully on their campaign promises.

To the left of both Sinn Féin and Labour, the PBP Party and associated smaller left-wing parties and independents have also gained traction over the same time frame as Sinn Féin. PBP is a Trotskyist political party and presents a radical left agenda. The consolidation of PBP alongside Sinn Féin, Labour and others is indicative of the emergence of a sustainable left/right cleavage in its politics, like in many

other European countries but which has been absent from the Irish case for most of its first hundred years. Unlike Sinn Féin, PBP, smaller leftist parties and independents do not present a realistic alternative government and would be unlikely to support any coalition. However, these parties have had an important impact on public discourse, bringing matters of social justice closer to the centre of public debate, while espousing a more radical approach to politics than had been present in Irish politics, including with regard to street protest and direct action.

Aside from Sinn Féin, the Social Democrats arguably represent the main existential challenge for Labour. The Social Democrats have positioned themselves as a centre-left alternative to Labour, offering a policy programme that is almost indistinguishable, in contrast with the more radical offerings of PBP and Sinn Féin. As it stands, following the 2024 general election, Labour and the Social Democrats have a combined total of 21 seats in Dáil Éireann,⁸⁴ on a combined vote share of just below 10%. The debate around a possible merger, or at least some sort of pact between the parties to maximise the centre-left representation in Dáil Éireann, will continue into the next election. As it stands, Labour has been more open to the prospect than the Social Democrats have been.⁸⁵

One of the primary reasons Labour has struggled to compete with these challengers is the lingering perception that it compromised its principles during its most recent time in government. The party's involvement in implementing austerity, despite its traditional advocacy for social justice and fairness, has led to a loss of trust among many voters, many of whom now view Labour as part of the political establishment, rather than a force for meaningful change. What's more, Labour's struggle to articulate a distinct and compelling identity has further hampered its ability to compete with new parties and new

ideas. While the party has a long history of advocating for workers' rights and social justice, it has struggled to differentiate itself from other left-wing parties. Labour's attempts to balance pragmatism with principle have sometimes resulted in a lack of clarity about where the party stands on key issues. These challenges are familiar to centre-left parties all around Europe. Labour has also faced particular challenges in engaging younger voters, who are increasingly drawn to parties like Sinn Féin, the Social Democrats and the Greens. These voters tend to prioritise issues including climate change, housing and social equality, areas where Labour's messaging has sometimes been overshadowed by more vocal and focused competitors, especially within Sinn Féin. Clearly, the party's failure to connect with younger demographics limits its ability to grow its base and regain relevance.

Accounting for the past and planning for the future

The potential for growth for the Irish Labour Party in the current political climate is shaped by the party's historical context, current challenges and the evolving political landscape. Despite its recent struggles, Labour has the opportunity to grow and influence policy, whether as part of a coalition government or from opposition.

Labour faces significant electoral challenges as it seeks to regain relevance in a highly competitive political landscape. The rise of Sinn Féin and other left-wing challengers, coupled with Labour's struggle to differentiate itself and rebuild trust, has made it difficult for the party to reclaim its position as a leading force in Irish politics. To overcome these challenges, Labour must return to its core values; engage with new constituencies, including younger voters, urban professionals and people of migrant backgrounds; and consider strategic alliances

that can help it navigate the complexities of modern politics. Labour should position itself as the party that offers practical solutions to these challenges, grounded in its values of social justice and equality, and a credible track record of serving in government. By addressing these issues, Labour can begin to chart a path forward and reassert itself as a leading force in Irish politics.

First and foremost, to increase its political and electoral relevance, Labour must address the legacy of its role in the austerity government of 2011-2016. This includes acknowledging the difficult decisions the party made, its mistakes and its successes, some of which have been mentioned here. Under the leadership of Alan Kelly (2020-2022), Labour became more robust in its defence of its time in government, pointing to the important achievements made even amid severe austerity, including with regard to the expansion of primary healthcare and the advancement of the cause of marriage equality and reproductive rights. The party also played an important role in moderating some of the more austere impulses of the Fine Gael party, its coalition partner.

Labour can also seek to engage with new constituencies, including younger voters and voters from a migrant background. Particularly as the Greens have declined as an electoral force, Labour could place greater emphasis on issues such as climate change, affordable housing and digital rights. Meanwhile, some parties, including Labour and Fianna Fáil, have made moves to attract support and candidates from people with migrant backgrounds. For many of these voters, questions of the Civil War or the subtle differences between the old parties of government will hold little relevance. Meanwhile, Labour's association with an internationally recognised political brand might also serve as an advantage. Labour's explicitly outward-looking and internationalist political identity, and the party's reputation of being among the most pro-European party in Ireland, could also open avenues for growth.

As discussed, Labour could focus its attention on climate policy, including investments in renewable energy, and support for a just transition for workers in industries affected by the shift to a low-carbon economy. Given Labour's strong EU credentials, as well as the relative decline of the Irish Green Party, Labour could make climate a more central feature of its platform. Meanwhile, as society becomes increasingly digitalised, Labour must also address issues related to digital rights, privacy and the regulation of big tech. Fundamentally though, Labour must continue its leadership on the social democratic policies that have been at the centre of its programme, including around progressive taxation, expanding access to affordable housing healthcare and childcare, improving workers' rights, and investing in public services.

Renewal inevitably requires the promotion of new leadership within any party, particularly individuals who can resonate with younger voters and bring fresh perspectives and thinking. On this score, Labour can feel optimistic, with seven of its 11 new TDs sitting in parliament for the first time following the 2024 election. These newcomers represent a clear break with the past and the austerity associated with the party's last time in government.

Finally, the political landscape in Ireland is evolving, with traditional party loyalties breaking down and new political movements and cleavages emerging. While Labour is sometimes criticised by its opponents for being a party of the establishment, it has also been willing to take risks, shoulder responsibility and has been at the forefront of practically every major social movement in the country since independence. The party's renewal will depend on its ability to adapt to changes in society, offering a platform that resonates with a diverse electorate and addresses the concerns of a modern Ireland.

For Labour to broaden its appeal beyond its traditional base, including middle-class progressives, urban voters, and those

concerned with social and environmental justice, the party may look to forge strategic alliances with other progressive movements and organisations. An example of this, at the time of writing, is the move by Labour to support a joint progressive candidate for the Irish Presidential election, which is scheduled to take place in autumn 2025.⁸⁶ Paradoxically, to make this work, Labour must work hard to be able to distinguish itself from other left-wing parties to justify why coalescing and cooperating would make sense. Clearly, by working together on common objectives, Labour and its allies could present a united front that could challenge the dominance of Sinn Féin on the left, while presenting a credible alternative to the current parties of government. Labour also has a history of durable connections with civil society organisations and social movements that align with its values, most obviously with the trade union movement, as well as human rights organisations, grassroots campaigns, and environmental and social justice non-governmental organisations. Emphasising these associations can demonstrate Labour's commitment to social change and increase its relevance to a broader range of voters.

5.2 Labour's options – power, opposition or alliances?

Opposition as a platform for renewal?

As with all parties, Labour's role in opposition can provide a platform for growth, allowing the party to rebuild its identity and credibility with voters. By taking principled stances on key issues, such as housing, healthcare and climate change, Labour could distinguish itself from both the parties of government and the other parties of opposition. This approach could help the party regain support among disillusioned

voters and attract those who are looking for a principled alternative to the current government. Labour could also differentiate itself from other parties on the centre-left by flaunting its international credentials within the European and international social democratic movements. The party could use its time in opposition to engage more deeply with civil society, unions and grassroots movements. But, in reality, Labour is a party of government with a track record of working hard to make people's lives better, including during difficult times. In opposition, Labour will focus on proving that it has credible, thought-out solutions and is ready to govern.

Coalition as a path to power?

Labour has a long history of participating in coalition governments, and this remains a viable path for the party to influence policy in the future. The party passed up the opportunity to stay in opposition in 2011 in a bid to consolidate into the main party of opposition when the membership voted to go into government with Fine Gael. Today, there is no realistic path for Labour to become the largest party in Ireland, nor has there ever realistically been one given the idiosyncrasies of Irish politics. In the pluralist, fragmented Irish political landscape, no single party is likely to achieve an outright majority, but Labour could play a crucial role as a coalition partner, as it has done eight times previously.

What is different for Labour today, compared to any other time in history, is the prospect of the emergence of a viable centre-left government for the first time. Since the general election in 2024, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are serving in coalition for the first time. For some, the era of Civil War politics in Ireland has ended. In opposition, Labour, along with Sinn Féin, the Social Democrats and the Greens, despite inevitable policy differences and tensions, have formed a coherent

opposition. By positioning itself as a reliable and experienced partner within this group, Labour could realistically form part of the next government, which could be the first to exclude the traditional parties of government.

However, Labour's potential for growth through participation in a future coalition depends on its ability to balance influence with maintaining a distinct identity. It has been noted that the party's involvement in past coalitions, particularly during the austerity years, led to an erosion of trust among its supporters. Labour needs to avoid repeating this mistake and would need to be sure that any coalition agreement included clear commitments to its policy objectives.

Strategic alliances for greater influence?

In the face of rising competition from other left-wing and progressive parties, Labour might consider forming strategic alliances to regain influence. Most obviously, Labour will need to explore the possibility of pacts, alliances or even mergers with like-minded parties to maximise the prospects for its policy agenda. There have only been a few outright mergers in Irish political history, including that between Democratic Left and Labour in 1999, and Labour would need to carefully manage any partnership, alliance or merger to avoid diluting its identity or being overshadowed by any potential partners. The success of any such alliance would depend on finding common ground on key issues while maintaining Labour's distinct voice, identity and values. Any merger would require not just alignment around policies, but also around party culture, leadership structures and grassroots membership. Any merger in politics would need to be carefully negotiated and communicated to ensure it is seen as a positive strategic move, rather than a sign of desperation. The most obvious candidate for a merger for Irish Labour would be with the Social Democrats, which emerged

in part from disillusioned Labour members. The parties have almost indistinguishable policy platforms and together took around 10% of the votes in the 2024 election, split almost evenly. The debate around a possible merger, or at least some sort of pact between the parties, will continue into the next election, with Labour being more open to the prospect than the Social Democrats.

Summary

The Irish Labour Party's potential for growth is tied to its ability to influence policy, whether as part of a coalition government or in opposition. While forming alliances or even merging with other parties presents opportunities for greater influence, these strategies must be carefully managed to ensure that Labour's identity is preserved. The party's ability to capitalise on shifts in public opinion, engage new voters and present a clear, compelling vision for the future will be crucial to its prospects for growth and renewal.

6

Conclusion

Labour has made an enormous positive contribution to the development of the modern Irish state. The party has been at the forefront of the most important social and progressive changes that have taken place in Ireland over the past century, particularly through the expansion of education and healthcare, and the promotion of social justice, workers' rights and gender equality. The party has also led every major campaign to affect social change in the country, including with regard to the decriminalisation of homosexuality, the introduction marriage equality and the liberalisation of reproductive rights. Labour as a party has consistently put itself at the centre of often-challenging debates and conversations and have led from the front by taking responsibility to make Ireland a better, more inclusive and more prosperous society.

In recent years, Labour has faced major challenges, particularly in the aftermath of its participation in the austerity government from 2011 to 2016. This saw the party implementing swingeing austerity and led to a dramatic decline in support for the party and an erosion of trust among its traditional base that it has yet to fully recover from. The party's electoral performances since the high watermark of 2011 represent a period of trauma for Labour that it is only starting to emerge from, following relatively strong performances in 2024 across local,

general and European elections. Despite the many challenges it faces, Labour has opportunities for renewal and growth. By reconnecting with voters, modernising its platform to address contemporary issues and potentially forging strategic alliances, Labour can re-establish itself at the centre of Irish politics.

Even the rise of competitor parties presents opportunities for Labour to form part of a left-leaning government, for the first time in Irish history, and to rely on its track record of participation in coalition governments. The rise of new political movements and parties is a common challenge for social democratic parties across Europe and further afield. Irish Labour must decide whether to seek out opportunities to collaborate with other progressive forces, when necessary, via strategic alliances, pacts or even full mergers. Questions regarding the potential for Ireland to sustain two tiny social democratic parties – the Irish Labour Party and the Social Democrats – with almost indistinguishable programmes will not go away.

As voter preferences become more fragmented, social democratic parties, including Labour, must engage with new constituencies, including younger voters; voters from migrant backgrounds; and those concerned about issues like climate change, digital rights and social equality. Ireland remains consistently among the most pro-European countries in the EU, and Labour has consistently been among the most pro-European parties in Ireland. The party must assert the pro-European part of its programme, especially compared with Sinn Féin and other parties of the left that have opposed subsequent treaty reforms over years and are much more equivocal on the European question than Labour, which is unambiguous in its support for the European project.

Meanwhile, Labour must, of course, take care not to abandon its core constituencies who have stayed with the party. Labour's relationship with the trade union movement has endured, despite

coming under pressure, especially during the years of austerity. The party must protect this relationship and maintain the promotion and protection of workers' rights as a central part of its identity, as the onset of artificial intelligence, automation and micro-processing continue to transform the world of work.

Labour is among the most pro-European voices in the country, advocating for Ireland's place within the EU and across a host of international organisations and alliances. Labour's place within the European and global social democratic movement, including its return to the European Parliament in 2024 after a decade away, afford the opportunity for the party to position itself as a player within Ireland's newly developing foreign policy and geopolitical context. Labour should emphasise its commitment and track record supporting and advancing the rules-based multilateral system, neutrality, human rights and social justice when seeking out new constituencies.

The experiences of the Irish Labour Party offer valuable lessons for social democratic parties across Europe and around the world. One of the key lessons from Labour's experience is the difficulty of balancing principles with pragmatism, particularly when participating in coalition governments. While governing requires compromise, it is essential for social democratic parties, including Irish Labour, to know their limits and to protect core values.

In an era of rising inequality, environmental degradation and geopolitical instability, Labour's commitment to social justice and human rights, both domestically and globally, serves as a reminder of the importance of the shared values of the social democratic tradition. Social democratic parties must continue to champion these values, advocating for policies that promote fairness, protect the vulnerable, and contribute to global peace and justice. Arguably, there is a greater need for credible, responsible social democratic governance now



more than ever, and there is a place – I dare say, a need – within Irish and European politics for the Irish Labour Party.

7

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- 16 Democratic Left originated from a split in 1992 from the Workers' Party, a Marxist-Leninist party, which itself emerged from a split within Sinn Féin in 1970. Democratic Left would ultimately merge with the Labour Party in 1999. This merger introduced the likes of Proinsias De Rossa, Pat Rabbitte and Eamon Gilmore, who would each go on to serve in important leadership roles within the Labour Party.
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Appendix A: Key figures in Irish Labour Party history

Below is an overview of some of the most significant figures in the history of the Irish Labour Party:

1. James Connolly (1868-1916)

- **Role:** Co-founder of the Irish Labour Party
- **Significance:** Scottish-born James Connolly was a prominent socialist leader and trade unionist. Connolly co-founded the Irish Labour Party in 1912, along with James Larkin and William O'Brien, and remained a key figure in the Irish labour movement throughout his life. He is best known for his involvement in the 1916 Easter Rising, where he served as one of the leaders of the rebellion. Connolly's execution after the Rising cemented his status as a martyr and a symbol of the struggle for Irish independence and workers' rights.

2. James Larkin (1874-1947)

- **Role:** Co-founder of the Irish Labour Party
- **Significance:** James "Big Jim" Larkin was a major figure in the Irish labour movement. As a trade unionist and socialist, Larkin

was instrumental in organising workers and advocating for the rights to unionise and strike. He co-founded the Irish Labour Party with James Connolly and William O'Brien. Larkin is particularly remembered for his leadership during the 1913 Dublin Lockout and for his charismatic oration. He is commemorated with a statue on O'Connell Street, the main thoroughfare in central Dublin.

3. William X. O'Brien (1881-1968)

- **Role:** Trade union leader and Labour politician
- **Significance:** William X. O'Brien was a key figure in the Irish trade union movement and the Irish Labour Party. He played a prominent role in the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) and was closely associated with James Larkin and James Connolly. O'Brien was influential in shaping Labour's early policies and strategies, including its predictable focus on workers' rights. O'Brien later served as a Labour TD, representing both Dublin South and Tipperary.

4. Tom Johnson (1872-1963)

- **Role:** Leader of the Irish Labour Party (1917-1927)
- **Significance:** Tom Johnson was the first leader of the Irish Labour Party and a key figure in its early development. Under his leadership, Labour became a significant force in Irish politics, advocating for workers' rights, social welfare and the establishment of a democratic republic. Johnson played a critical role in drafting the Democratic Programme of the first Dáil in 1919, which laid out a vision for a socially just and egalitarian Ireland. His leadership during the formative years of the party set the foundation for Labour's future influence.

5. William Norton (1900-1963)

- **Role:** Leader of the Irish Labour Party (1932-1960)
- **Significance:** William Norton served as the leader of the Labour Party for nearly three decades, during which time he guided the party through significant challenges and changes. Norton was instrumental in Labour's participation in coalition governments, including the first inter-party government (1948-1951) and the second inter-party government (1954-1957). As Tánaiste and Minister for Social Welfare, Norton played a key role in expanding social welfare programs and improving workers' rights in Ireland.

6. Brendan Corish (1918-1990)

- **Role:** Leader of the Irish Labour Party (1960-1977)
- **Significance:** Brendan Corish was a transformative leader, who shifted Labour towards a more clearly defined social democratic platform. Under his leadership, Labour adopted the slogan "The Seventies Will Be Socialist", reflecting Corish's ambition to position Labour as a progressive force in Irish politics. Although Labour did not achieve electoral dominance during Corish's tenure, his leadership marked an important evolution in the party's ideological orientation and its commitment to social justice and equality.

7. Dick Spring (1950-)

- **Role:** Leader of the Irish Labour Party (1982-1997)
- **Significance:** Dick Spring is one of Labour's most prominent leaders and credited with revitalising the party in the 1980s and 1990s. Under his leadership, Labour experienced significant electoral success, including its best-ever result in the 1992 general

election. Spring served as Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs in the 1992-1997 coalition government, where he played a key role in advancing the Northern Ireland peace process. His leadership brought Labour closer to the centre of Irish politics and positioned the party as a credible partner in government.

8. Eamon Gilmore (1955-)

- **Role:** Leader of the Irish Labour Party (2007-2014)
- **Significance:** Eamon Gilmore led Labour to its highest-ever number of seats in the 2011 general election, becoming the second-largest party in the Dáil. As Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Gilmore played a key role in the coalition government with Fine Gael during the challenging period of economic recovery following the global financial crisis. However, his leadership also saw Labour's support decline sharply due to its involvement in implementing austerity measures, leading to his resignation in 2014.

9. Joan Burton (1949-)

- **Role:** Leader of the Irish Labour Party (2014-2016)
- **Significance:** Joan Burton served as the first female leader of the Labour Party and held the position during a particularly difficult period for the party. As Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection, Burton focused on social welfare reforms and protecting the most vulnerable during the recovery from the economic crisis. Despite her efforts, Labour suffered a significant electoral defeat in the 2016 general election, leading to her resignation as leader.

10. Brendan Howlin (1956-)

- **Role:** Leader of the Irish Labour Party (2016-2020)
- **Significance:** Entering politics via the anti-nuclear campaigns in the 1980s, Brendan Howlin was one of the longest-serving members of Irish Labour's parliamentary party, serving in a range of ministerial positions and as Leas-Cheann Comhairle (deputy speaker) of Dáil Éireann, the lower house of parliament, across a parliamentary career spanning over 40 years. Howlin served as Minister for Public Expenditure during the 2011-2016 government. Labour failed to make any sustained electoral gains during his time in office and what was a difficult time for the party.

11. Alan Kelly (1975-)

- **Role:** Leader of the Irish Labour Party (2020-2022)
- **Significance:** Alan Kelly served as an MEP and Senator before being elected TD in 2011 for the Tipperary constituency. Representing something of a new generation of Labour politicians, and from a rural background, Kelly served as Minister for the Environment and was elected deputy leader of the party during his first term in office. Being returned to office in 2016 when Labour lost most of its seats, Kelly stood out for his willingness to defend Labour's time in office during the 2011-2016 government. Taking over from Howlin following the 2020 election, Kelly was unable to make substantial gains and was replaced after less than two years by Ivana Bacik.

12. Ivana Bacik (1968-)

- **Role:** Leader of the Irish Labour Party (2022-present)
- **Significance:** Ivana Bacik, a long-standing advocate for social justice, gender equality and human rights, was elected leader of Labour in 2022. Known for her academic background and activism, Bacik represents a new generation of leadership for Labour. Her tenure is focused on renewing the party's platform, reconnecting with voters and addressing contemporary issues such as climate change, housing and social equity.

Appendix B:

Timeline of major events in the history of the Irish Labour Party

- 1909** **Formation of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU):** James Larkin establishes the ITGWU, which would play a crucial role in the labour movement and the eventual formation of the Irish Labour Party.
- 1912** **Foundation of the Irish Labour Party:** James Connolly, James Larkin and William X. O'Brien, along with other trade unionists, found the Irish Labour Party to represent the interests of the working class in the Irish parliament.
- 1913** **The Dublin Lockout:** A major industrial dispute led by James Larkin and the ITGWU, which marks a significant moment in the Irish labour movement and in modern Irish history.
- 1916** **Easter Rising:** James Connolly, one of Labour's founders, plays a leading role in the Easter Rising against British rule. Connolly's execution after the rebellion makes him a martyr and a symbol of both the Irish independence movement and the struggle for workers' rights.

- 1918** **Election to the first Dáil:** Labour decides not to contest the 1918 general election to avoid splitting the nationalist vote, allowing Sinn Féin to dominate. This decision reflects Labour's support for the broader goal of Irish independence.
- 1922** **First representation in the Dáil:** Labour wins 17 seats in the first general election after the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1921, making it the third-largest party in the Dáil.
- 1948** **Participation in the first inter-party government:** Under the leadership of William Norton, Labour enters a coalition government with Fine Gael, Clann na Poblachta and others. Norton becomes Tánaiste and Minister for Social Welfare.
- 1954** **Second inter-party government:** Labour once again participates in a coalition government, with William Norton serving as Tánaiste and Minister for Industry and Commerce.
- 1960** **Brendan Corish becomes leader:** Brendan Corish's leadership marks a shift towards a more defined social democratic platform, with Labour adopting the slogan "The Seventies Will Be Socialist".
- 1973** **Coalition with Fine Gael:** Labour joins a coalition government with Fine Gael, with Brendan Corish serving as Tánaiste. The government introduces significant social reforms, including the introduction of free secondary education.

- 1981-1982 Short-lived coalitions:** Labour briefly participates in coalition governments in 1981 and again in 1982, under the leadership of first Michael O’Leary and then Dick Spring. Dick Spring takes over as Labour leader, beginning a period of renewal and revitalisation for the party.
- 1992 Best electoral performance to date:** Labour achieves its best-ever result to date in the 1992 general election, winning 33 seats. The party forms a coalition government with Fianna Fáil, with Dick Spring serving as Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs.
- 1994 Rainbow coalition:** Labour, under Dick Spring, enters a “rainbow coalition” with Fine Gael and the Democratic Left. This government continues until 1997, with significant achievements in social policy and the Northern Ireland peace process.
- 1999 Merger with Democratic Left:** Labour merges with Democratic Left, strengthening its position on the left and broadening its appeal.
- 2007 Eamon Gilmore becomes leader:** Eamon Gilmore leads Labour, focusing on rebuilding the party after a period of decline.
- 2011 Historic electoral success:** Labour wins 37 seats in the general election, becoming the second-largest party in the Dáil. The party enters a grand coalition government with Fine Gael, with Eamon Gilmore as Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade.

- 2014** **Joan Burton becomes leader:** After disastrous local and European elections for the party, Joan Burton becomes the first female leader of the Labour Party. She serves as Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection during a challenging period for the party.
- 2016** **Electoral collapse:** Labour suffers a significant defeat in the general election, retaining only seven seats. The party enters opposition.
- 2016-2022** **Wilderness years:** Brendan Howlin (2016-2020) and Alan Kelly (2020-2022) lead the party through some of its toughest years, failing to make any significant progress, while arresting the party's decline.
- 2022** **Ivana Bacik becomes leader:** Ivana Bacik is elected as Labour leader, focusing on renewing the party and focusing more attention on issues such as climate change, housing and social justice.
- 2024** **Green shoots of recovery** at local, general and European elections; the party sees 56 local councillors, 11 TDs and an MEP elected.
- 2025-** **Coalition woes and Ireland gets foreign policy:** Labour is increasingly positioned within a coherent left-leaning opposition, alongside other parties of the centre-left, which could emerge as a viable government to replace the dominance of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael for the first time. Ireland starts to come to terms with its military neutrality and takes moral leadership on the war in Gaza.

Biography



Barry Colfer holds a Ph.D. and M.Phil from the Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) at the University of Cambridge. He is the Director of Research at the Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA), Ireland's leading international affairs and public policy think tank. He also continues to teach politics and public policy at Cambridge. Prior to joining the IIEA, Barry held postdoctoral fellowships at at EUI Florence, the University of Oxford, Harvard University, and the Politecnico di Torino in Italy. Barry also studied previously at University College Dublin and spent two years in student politics and has worked at both the Irish and European Parliaments as well as with a number of leading European think tanks. Barry's research interests include the politics of European integration, the future of work, and British-Irish relations.

The Next Left Country Case Studies is a new publication series and an outcome of the work within the Next Left Research Programme geared by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Karl Renner Institut. The series, commissioned to provide an insight into the Social Democratic parties in Europe and beyond, focuses on exploring the current state of Social Democracy in selected countries. Each publication guides the reader through the transformation of national political party systems and parties' internal organisation, highlighting the authors' takes on their future prospects. The series' insightful analysis of domestic political contexts, exploring the often turbulent political history of Social Democratic parties, enables a full immersion into specific political programmes and policies, while simultaneously providing a canvas for sharing the best practices for the Social Democratic movement to move forward on a global scale.

Resilience and renewal: The evolution and future prospects of the Irish Labour Party

Barry Colfer

The Irish Labour Party (ILP) has been a persistently mighty stakeholder in the unique political and socio-economic landscape of the Republic of Ireland. Rooted in the trade union movement, it has built a reputation for consistency and a clear progressive identity. While remaining steadfast in its core values, the party has evolved on key issues — shifting from Euroscepticism to a pro-European stance and embracing a broad civil liberties agenda — mirroring trends among many of its sister parties. However, unlike many of them, the ILP has never attained the position of the majority party, a reality closely tied to the legacy of the Civil War. The book moves beyond analysis to explore the ILP's strategic choices for the present and future, highlighting its resilience and capacity for renewal, most recently under Ivana Bacik's leadership. Amid strengthened competitors on the left, protest voting and acute economic pressures, Barry Colfer ultimately contends that the party's central task is to define its path clearly and make difficult choices to advance social progress in contemporary Ireland.

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