The ‘Playing a Blinder’ myth: The Republic of Ireland’s pandemic response revisited

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Abstract
In a previous paper, ‘The Playing a Blinder Myth and why we must not forget shortcomings in unprecedented times’, it was argued that acting Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar’s response to the pandemic was one of opportunism rather than one of competency. By adopting a similar method to the previous article, this piece will provide an updated discussion and commentary, based on newspaper articles covering the newly formed Irish (Republic of Ireland) government’s response to the pandemic to date. This paper discusses the governance of the coalition of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and The Green Party to examine whether the context of the pandemic deflected the Irish public’s attention from what was simply a continuation of the Government’s normal approach to welfare, housing and healthcare. Therefore, this paper will focus on the coalition’s decision to screen and tax recipients of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, the enactment of housing strategies that have not met the existing issues within the housing market and how previous measures have not provided adequate protection for the healthcare system during the pandemic.

In this short article, the Republic of Ireland’s government response to the pandemic is revisited after a year of living with coronavirus within the context of welfare, housing and healthcare.

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The call for ‘change’ and the coalition

On 26 June 2020, Ireland’s political landscape saw the formation of a coalition government (Murray, 2020). An unlikely joining of political rivals in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael with the addition of The Green Party muted the call for change that appeared in the build-up to the 2020 election (O’Cionnaith, 2020). Given the new arrangements in the Irish government, this article will include a broader commentary on the governance of the coalition during the pandemic. In a general sense, Irish society has undergone a radical change because of the pandemic (Mullally, 2020). However, it is those deemed to be in an already vulnerable position that have been left further exposed as longstanding issues with the funding of services and structural deficiencies within the State have been highlighted in recent months (Heaney, 2021).

Following the initial response to the pandemic, the Irish public welcomed assured leadership from the then Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar in the first few months of 2020. Nevertheless, almost a year on, the public have demonstrated less confidence in the Government’s efforts to manage the pandemic. In a poll conducted with a 1200-person sample, 51% of the respondents felt as though the Government were handling the pandemic poorly (Leahy, 2021). This has resulted in a decline in the approval ratings for the coalition parties, along with its leaders (Horgan-Jones, 2021; Leahy, 2021; Marsh, 2020).

The previous commentary noted that the leadership of Trump and Johnson shone a more positive light on Leo Varadkar during his time as Taoiseach, but within the year, circumstances elsewhere have begun to change. America elected a President (Joe Biden) who has promised to tackle the virus through a comprehensive vaccination programme (Martin and Burns, 2020), and to unite a polarised population that has been subject to the politicisation of the coronavirus (Martin and Burns, 2020). Closer to home, the United Kingdom’s death rate per 100,000 of the population is one of the highest globally, but early signs of a successful vaccine rollout may result in a lift on all lockdown restrictions by the 21st of June (Staunton, 2021). Additionally, the success of Australia and New Zealand in quelling the surge of coronavirus has meant that the Irish diaspora in both countries have returned to relative normality (McGrath, 2020b). With circumstances changing in nations in which Irish people typically engage, will the Irish Government’s current measures come under further scrutiny from the Irish people?

Given the recent turbulent year, it seems appropriate to re-examine the performance of the Irish Government. With similar political ideologies shared by both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael (Mercille, 2016), and the role of the Green Party in supporting both parties, it is feasible to evaluate the approach taken in matters concerning welfare, housing and healthcare during the pandemic. In doing so, the initial response to issues relating to
these areas will be explored to determine: (a) whether the context of the pandemic altered the public’s reaction to policy measures and (b) if policy measures were a continuation of the Irish Government’s neoliberal rhetoric rather than a shift in ideological position.

**An ideological turning point or normal service resumed?**

**Welfare**

Ireland’s ‘war on welfare’ has been a constant since the 2008 recession (Sheahan, 2013). The ambition to minimise welfare dependency and increase activation appeared juxtaposed to the bi-weekly payment of €350 for those made unemployed by lockdown conditions. Hick and Murphy (2020) link the focus on labour activation in liberal welfare models directly to the economic crash of 2008. Within this developing welfare model, there is an emphasis placed on the penalisation and behavioural conditioning of its welfare recipients (Hick and Murphy, 2020). Given the increased volume of unemployment as a result of the first lockdown (Wall, 2021), it appeared Leo Varadkar, when acting as Taoiseach was altering his position on this welfare model, but the alteration was short-lived. This was highlighted through the placement of social welfare officers in Irish airports to check if those receiving the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) left the country for non-essential travel (Michael, 2020a). This screening resulted in 2500 payments being stopped and questions from the Data Protection Commission regarding its legality (McGrath, 2020a; Michael, 2020a). While this may seem justified in some respects, it coincides with widespread criticism of Ireland Government’s lack of screening of international travellers that has resulted in spikes in coronavirus cases on the island (Carswell, 2021). What was deemed to be an unreasonable screening of welfare recipients (Michael, 2020b), has been followed by restructuring of payment rates\(^2\) (Moore, 2020) and the unexpected introduction of taxation on the PUP for recipients (Hoare, 2021; O’Riordan, 2021). With current measures suggesting a continuation of the Irish Government’s ‘war on welfare’, it appears that the positive public reaction to the PUP was misguided given the circumstances at hand.

**Housing**

During the first lockdown, protection for those with legitimate tenancies were introduced, but these welcomed measures overlooked Ireland’s ‘rent-a-roomers’. Focus Ireland (2020) state that the protection for homeowners and renters in March 2020 exhibited the Government’s capabilities to enact policy that can prevent evictions and possible homelessness. Still, the original ban on evictions was lifted in August 2020 causing an influx in people approaching Threshold\(^3\) for assistance regarding their evictions and letters of termination (Halpin, 2020). Ireland’s re-entry into Level 5 restrictions had resulted in short-term bans on evictions and rent increases, but these measures have again failed to consider those in vulnerable positions (Baker, 2021; Duffy, 2020). The current situation means that protection from eviction and rent increases can only be guaranteed if you are in arrears with payments due to the
pandemic (Baker, 2021; Duffy, 2020). Traditionally, the Irish Government was involved in the direct provision of social housing (rent and ownership), but this has been overtaken in the past 30 years by neoliberal policies that have shifted towards the marketisation of housing policy (Hearne and Murphy, 2018). This has resulted in the increased vulnerability of those who are unable to afford homes at current market prices due to the commodification and financialisation of housing (Hearne and Murphy, 2018; Murphy and Hearne, 2019). The Government has reinforced its current stance on housing by voting against a ban on rent increases for the next 3 years (McCurry, 2020). While previous pandemic housing policies were commended by the public, recent developments highlight the Government’s inability to protect vulnerable tenants in a housing crisis (Blaney, 2021).

Healthcare

The temporary one-tier health model displayed the Government’s capabilities in tackling prevalent issues in Irish society (Clifford, 2020). What was considered to be a political risk was implemented without question to tackle the circumstances at hand (Clifford, 2020; Sheehan, 2020). Typically, Ireland operates within a two-tiered healthcare system, which further signals to the Irish Government’s commodification and financialisation of social policy through the implementation of a private and public healthcare model (Darker et al., 2018). Generally, this means that if you can afford private health insurance, you will receive a better quality of care than those in the public sector (Darker et al., 2018; Kennelly et al., 2020). Since the economic crash of 2008, the Irish Government has placed greater importance on the commercialisation of private healthcare and failed to ensure the adequate resourcing of the public sector (Darker et al., 2018; Kennelly et al., 2020). Despite early efforts, it appeared as though a thorough consideration regarding the capacity of the healthcare system was lacking (O’Kelly, 2021). Having done relatively well to control the virus during the winter months, the Government took risks at Christmas time. Following pressure to deliver a ‘meaningful Christmas’, the Government relaxed lockdown restrictions (Pogatchnik, 2021). While the ease on restrictions was welcomed by the Irish media and business owners, it resulted in a rise of positive cases (Pogatchnik, 2021). This wave of coronavirus saw hospitalisations of infected persons double every week, thus challenging an inefficient healthcare system (O’Kelly, 2021; Pogatchnik, 2021). Introducing a ‘Zero Covid’ strategy is not considered to be feasible in Ireland (Hennessy, 2021) and with calls for such strategies from opposition parties dismissed by those in Government (O’Halloran, 2021), there is now a reliance on the effective administering of vaccines. However, a combination of continued lockdowns and the delayed delivery of vaccines has caused public frustration (Horgan-Jones and McQuinn, 2021). In March of 2020, the Government proved to the public that they could tackle prevailing issues in healthcare, but more recently, Irish citizens are being reminded of the Government’s usual approach to healthcare with no substantial protective measures provided for hospitals or vulnerable people in the community.
Conclusion
With the dust settling, it can be argued that the national panic that ensued in the early stages of the pandemic perhaps deflected the public’s critical observations of Government policy. The continued role of the Government in the stigmatisation of welfare recipients, the dismissal of insecure tenants in a housing crisis and the ongoing issues concerning the healthcare system call for a shift away from welcoming pragmatic measures that overlook those in precarious positions. Instead, we should adopt further awareness of the coalition’s governance and how this impacts upon those most vulnerable in Irish society. In doing so, we can prevent current circumstances from altering our perceptions of what is, in essence, ineffective leadership.

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Notes
1. United Kingdom’s death rate per 100,000 of population during the pandemic https://www.statista.com/statistics/1111779/coronavirus-death-rate-europe-by-country/.
2. Changes to PUP from 16 October 2020–30 June 2021 https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/64613-covid-19-pandemic-unemployment-payment-rates-announced-19-october-2020/#rates-from-16-october-2020.
3. Threshold is a national housing charity.

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