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Breaking Out of the Box: The Challenge for Irish Greens in Government

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Among the many challenges facing Green parties in governing coalitions is how to implement broad solutions when constrained by limited portfolios and shape policy in areas beyond their traditional associations. Irish Green member of parliament Neasa Hourigan discusses how her party is working to listen to and create spaces for dissenting voices, in order to formulate bold visions for the future while continuing to make progress in government.

This interview is part of a series that we publish in partnership with Le Grand Continent on green parties in Europe.

Green European Journal: As a member of a Green party currently in government, what do you see as the main issues driving Irish politics today?

Neasa Hourigan: Unsurprisingly, Covid-19 in particular and health in general have been major drivers of discussion across the country until quite recently. The pandemic has led to a complete reset in how we do everything. Like every country around the world, we've seen life grind to a halt in a way that I don't think we've ever experienced before. With that came deliberations about the kind of society we are and questioning the direction we're taking. These discussions are taking place in a context of eroding public trust.

Housing is also a prominent issue, as in other European countries. Housing is particularly fraught in Ireland; we have high levels of homelessness, unaffordable housing, and a tradition of home ownership that exacerbates the problem. In the last decades, the government has moved towards a completely privatised, market-centric way of providing housing which has utterly failed. From a Green perspective, the difficult choices that will need to be made around housing emissions will be even harder in a privatised context.

Equality is another key issue. On this front, Ireland is experiencing a sea change, certainly after the Marriage Equality Referendum and the rollback of the 8th Amendment. We are a progressive society dealing with institutions that haven't caught up with public opinion. There's a whole raft of issues that are yet to be legislated on, and histories yet to be reckoned with; from women being forced to put their children up for adoption, to access to birth certificates. Greens consider themselves to be explicitly feminists and champions of equality, but we're in a government that isn't quite as progressive as our party is. However, we have the ministry so we're hoping this government will make real progressive change in our time.

Our latest edition – Moving Targets: Geopolitics in a Warming

How have attitudes on climate issues changed in Irish society and politics?

The climate issue is taking root in Irish politics. When the Greens entered government in the 2000s as a minority, it felt like we were trying to push marginal issues. Now, the climate crisis is taken more seriously by the public and other parties. The pandemic has fed into that. On one hand, people are more aware that things can go very wrong, very quickly. On the other hand, the pause and system reset have demonstrated that change is possible.

However, the climate crisis has still not been given the level of scrutiny, funding, and hard work it really requires. The government and other political parties take a siloed approach to addressing it. In government, it has been confined to specific departments and the approach has been to give the climate and energy portfolio to Greens. Anyone experienced in Green policy knows that is ineffective. It is up to Greens to lead the way and demonstrate to other parties and the government a holistic approach. So far, we're introducing wellbeing indicators across budgets and a climate bill has been passed that we're working to mainstream into every department.

One of the most radical things you can do as a Green politician is to be in the finance, housing, or equality spaces and not just stay in a climate or environment box. All of those things are intractably linked to the climate crisis and, ultimately, unless we unpick all the systems of government and how we live, we're not going to solve the climate crisis.

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How have the Greens experienced being in government so far?

The decision to enter government was quite fraught and played out in public under the watchful eyes of other parties. Personally, I have found it very challenging to be part of the establishment while looking towards the next generation of the debate and introducing new topics.

Another challenge stems from other parties' perception of the Greens. They consistently associate Greens with topics like transport and energy, while questioning our credibility on the "big stuff" like banking, tax expenditure, and deficits. When we engage on, say, taxation, they think "What's that got to do with trees?".

To hold on to that activist space and bring forward-looking ideas into the debate, without operating too close to our mandate in government, we created the Just Transition Greens almost immediately after the decision to go into government. The group has allowed us to

keep our ears to the ground and connect with activists who don't necessarily want to join the political party. This non-party space has allowed us to articulate a socially just vision for green politics.

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Ireland was a very rural society until relatively recently. How does this shape the debate around Green politics in Ireland?

Ireland is a post-colonial society that was dominated by farming until recently. Most families have strong links to farming and rural areas. I can tell you all the different homesteads around Ireland where my family comes from. It's a very Irish thing to be able to do.

In the last two to three decades, urban areas, particularly in the tri-county Dublin area, have exploded. There's a natural unease around that as we try to find our new identity. Some of this unease has found its voice in a fairly divisive conversation.

Parties with strongholds in rural areas have suffered from the rapid urbanisation. If you're a rural political group and you want to win votes and lock down a certain cohort of voters, having an easily identifiable bogeyman is very useful. The Greens have been characterised as against rural Ireland; we're portrayed as the bad guys who want to stop the industrial harvesting of peat or put a stop to beef production. What we're actually saying is that Ireland is onshoring other people's emissions by growing and exporting 80 per cent of its meat production, which is unsustainable. But this debate is not just about the Green agenda; it's more about our emerging urbanisation, and a kind of general renegotiation of how society works.

Green politics has a lot to offer in connecting urban and rural Ireland, as well as looking towards the future. We have a strong tradition of community action and ownership in Ireland. I think Green politicians should not only talk about the here and now, providing specific detail about policies across every department, but also provide a vision of what a non-consumerist society will look like in the future.

President Michael D. Higgins puts forward such a vision for "radical reciprocity" by drawing from Irish rural heritage. He recalls the tradition of "Meitheal" in which the community bands together to produce according to its needs. He argues that our modern system of governance has really undermined and eroded that tradition. Radical reciprocity is what the Green vision should be.

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There is a parallel with the Greens running the equalities ministry. It seems that part of Green politics in Ireland is about helping it transition into a nation of the future.

Absolutely. We're a relatively young society. One of the best things about Ireland that isn't appreciated enough is how political its people are and their belief in equality and fairness. In Ireland, we talk about "pub politics" where it's clear people are really politically engaged even when they are not a member of a party.

They always have been. Historically, Irish people know who their local politicians are, what party they belong to and why. They're used to having their politician knock on their door, which is not common in other countries.

The Repeal the 8th campaign showed the impact this personal politics can have. Campaigners went knocking on doors and spoke with members of their families, sharing personal experiences around access to abortion. The campaign showed that when you have a populace that is engaged and educated, you can really make a difference even when you are surrounded by the rural versus urban debate.

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How important is the EU's influence on Ireland and its politics?

Ireland has been on a journey with Europe. Our membership was a significant move away from an unhealthy relationship with the UK. For many years, the EU was the bringer of reform and funding. Where I grew up, in Limerick, EU funding improved sporting projects and transport infrastructure. The EU played a part in making Ireland more socially progressive. Irish people think of themselves in an earnest way as Europeans, and very much identify with the EU's promise of a fair and just society.

At the same time, Ireland sees the contradictions of Europe. Remember, we're a post-colonial society that tends to be wary of authority imposed from outside. The legacy of austerity and the Troika during the 2008 crash leaves a sour taste in the mouth of people witnessing debt-sharing in the Covid-19 crisis. There is a feeling that "It was fine to punish us, but now it's happening to bigger, more powerful countries, austerity is being recognised as a failed model and a new line is being taken." That's not to say people don't acknowledge the huge mistakes made by the Irish government in the run-up to the crash. But they question why things are different this time around.

Where does Ireland sit in Europe? Its interests are split between the indebted countries of the south and the fiscally conversative, low-tax countries of the north.

The current centre-right government often refers to the "middle of the pack" when they talk about Ireland's position in the EU, usually when talking about debt. The Irish Green Party is

one of the only political parties in the country that is critical of the low rate of corporation tax. And there's been a change in the last six months with the global tax deal which we helped secure by advocating and applying pressure with our coalition partners.

Now that's not to say that I don't understand the concern of smaller economies, and particularly third countries. Smaller economies do not have the economies of scale that larger ones have so they rely on corporate arrangements to bridge the gaps. Smaller economies would therefore be hugely disadvantaged and might never catch up under a universal corporation tax regime.

At the same time, the Irish Greens see the damage in terms of global inequality when countries cannot reap what they are due and cannot invest in infrastructure, education, and connectivity. I say this in our national parliament all the time: you cannot separate the discussion around climate justice from that on tax justice.

More generally, while we consider our government to be centre-right, Ireland's position on the spectrum of EU governments is in the centre, with elements of social progressiveness that will hopefully deepen as time goes on.

How closely do the Irish Greens work with other Greens around Europe?

We are members of the European Greens and work closely with them. When working on some new language around the corporation tax issue, we gathered input from some of our colleagues in the EU who had been very critical of Ireland. They provided useful insights into how to make our point to our government without starting a massive row.

We also work collaboratively at the EU level on European elections. When it comes to forming a government or looking for a new policy idea, there's a real kind of collaborative hive mind there. So I always think that we're quite lucky. From my experience, we have a closer relationship with our European counterparts than other political parties do with theirs.

I also think that there's an opportunity to work in a similar breakout space as the Just Transition Greens, with other European Greens who are in government and experiencing similar challenges. I'm very keen to find other Greens across Europe who want to stay connected with on-the-ground experiences while navigating the very significant constraints of being in government.

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How important are relations with political actors in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in Britain?

The connections between ourselves and Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales are very important but differ. We're closest to the Northern Ireland and the Scottish Greens.

The most important one for us is Northern Ireland obviously, also because the Northern Irish Greens are part of the Irish Green Party. We try to align with them. Claire Bailey, the party leader, and Rachel Woods are both Members of the Legislative Assembly [the devolved legislature of Northern Ireland]. Both of these women are inspirational. They, like myself, are explicitly feminist politicians and they take up that space in a political spectrum where that is quite difficult. I worked in Belfast for five years, and it's not necessarily an easy place to be a progressive feminist environmentalist. In a power-sharing system, if you're not on one side you can be edged out of the debate but these leaders consistently propose innovative policy positions.

The English experience at the moment is quite specific. Unfortunately, the Anglo-Irish relationship generally is quite poor, probably the worst it has been for two decades. At a time when we really need to be in the closest collaboration, it is hard to make any meaningful connection with the English government.

As an Irish Green politician, what is your vision for Europe and its place in the world?

Although I'm very critical of Ireland's position on corporation tax, I do think that a level of sovereignty and relative levels of parity between nations of different sizes have strengthened the EU. I know people sometimes feel that the EU is slow to act or that its decision-making process is too easily frustrated. But that has managed to keep it together and given smaller states a sense of power.

I'm an old-school pacifist and I don't believe in increasing militarisation or the centralisation of democracy. The diversity of experience among Europe's democracies is one of its greatest strengths. There is much work to be done on communicating that democracy and strengthening it at the local level, but Europe's checks and balances are important.

Personally, I think returning to local government models is important for Europe and Ireland. In Ireland, we've largely dismantled our local democracy. I would like community decision-making to be seen as part of our ideological strength. Communities making their own decisions can be a path towards solving the climate crisis.

Thinking globally, Europe leads through ideas not physical strength. If you look at where large powers do well, it is the ideological battle that is often the most meaningful. Although the US spends a lot on the military, its culture has been the most meaningful to the world. If the EU is to continue to be a broad church as well as a force in the world, it needs to put forward a vision of power that is about human rights, trust, and forbearance towards struggling nations.

Midway through the election cycle, what do you see as strategic priorities for the Greens going forward?

It's difficult to have a clear idea of your strategic goals when you're in government – particularly when you're a minority party – because you're often accepting decisions that don't align with your ideology and making concessions elsewhere. But it is the job of the Green party to look towards the future. For decades we have been the ones not just talking about what happens in the next 18 months, but also what will happen in 18 years. To hold

on to that strength, you need to break out of the box of government. And that's what we've tried to do with the Just Transition Greens. For Greens in government, holding onto that activist energy and dynamism is a huge challenge. But it can also be a lifesaver for those struggling in a centre-right government who also wish to find a way to communicate a vision for socially just Green politics.

Neasa Hourigan is the Green Party TD for Dublin. Neasa is the Green Party Spokesperson on Finance & Health and former Chair of the Green Party Policy Council. She has a Masters of Architecture from University College Dublin, a Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education and has lectured in sustainable communities, environmental design and green procurement at both Queen's University Belfast and Technological University Dublin. She was appointed Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Budgetary Oversight in September 2020.

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