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Beyond Nationalism? The Anti-Austerity Social Movement in Ireland

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Published in:
Journal of Civil Society

DOI:
[10.1080/17448689.2017.1355031](https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2017.1355031)

Publication date:
2017

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

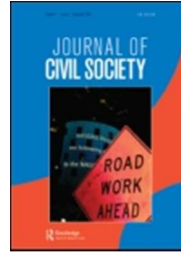
Dunphy, R. (2017). Beyond Nationalism? The Anti-Austerity Social Movement in Ireland: Between Domestic Constraints and Lessons from Abroad. *Journal of Civil Society*, 13(3), 267-283.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2017.1355031>

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Beyond nationalism? The Anti-Austerity Social Movement in Ireland: Between Domestic Constraints and Lessons from Abroad

Journal:	<i>Journal of Civil Society</i>
Manuscript ID	RCIS-2017-0019.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Ireland, Anti-Austerity protests, Right2Water

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Beyond nationalism? The Anti-Austerity Social Movement in Ireland: Between Domestic Constraints and Lessons from Abroad

Abstract

The European financial crisis has inspired a new wave of social activism, challenging established parties and party systems. In Ireland, anti-austerity activism has produced one of the largest social protest movements the country has ever seen, culminating in a mass Right2Water campaign in 2014-15. Supported by several trade unions, numerous community groups, and some political parties, it has organized more than 100 protests, including huge demonstrations that forced concessions from the Government. It also produced a Right2Change political campaign in 2015 that sought to challenge the right-wing consensus in Irish politics. Some activists have explicitly sought to emulate and learn from the example of new political parties like *Podemos* in Spain. Yet to date, the traditional party structure remains intact, and the hopes of emulating the success of radical activists elsewhere remain muted. At the same time, the new wave of anti-austerity activism in Ireland has seen a conscious attempt to involve Ireland in a transnational European sphere with activists engaging in intense dialogue with their counter-parts in other European countries. Irish social movement activists have looked to Europe before for inspiration and a sharing of experiences; for example, during the anti-nuclear and feminist struggles of the 1980s. But the most recent attempt to create a Europeanised public space in response (partially at least) to the perceived 'blockage' in the Irish party system, is something fairly innovative in Irish politics. This paper, which is based in part on ten semi-structured interviews with politicians and social movement activists, considers the achievements and failings of the Irish anti-austerity movement to date.

Keywords: Ireland, Anti-Austerity protests, Right2Water.

Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, since gaining independence from Britain in 1920 until the 1990s, the state now known as the Republic of Ireland was regarded as amongst the most conservative in Europe. From the consolidation of the party system in the late 1920s and

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3 early 1930s until the general election of 2011, between 80 per cent and 90 per cent of the
4 electorate regularly voted for two big centre-right Catholic nationalist parties - *Fianna Fáil*
5 (FF) and *Fine Gael* (FG) – with the Irish Labour Party, one of the most centrist social
6 democratic parties in western Europe, polling a desultory average of around 10 per cent of the
7 national vote. Ireland was inhospitable territory for progressive, radical, left, liberal or secular
8 politics of any variety. Political stagnation was matched by economic stagnation. Until the
9 so-called Celtic Tiger economic lift-off of the late 1990s and early 2000s, Ireland was one of
10 the most economically backward and underdeveloped countries in Western Europe. The
11 absence of an industrial revolution meant that persistently high unemployment was matched
12 by large-scale emigration which became an accepted facet of Irish life. From the 1920s to the
13 1990s, large numbers of Irish citizens emigrated to north America and the United Kingdom in
14 search of a better life. Emigration had the effect of further reducing any pressure for political
15 change at home, by removing the youngest and most dynamic groups in Irish society.

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26 Several other aspects of Irish political culture tended to defuse pressure for change –
27 and render Ireland less given to the politics of social protest than many other European
28 countries. As has often been noted (see, for example, Kirby & Murphy, 2011), Irish political
29 culture displays a strong tendency towards both localism and personalism. The former refers
30 to a tendency to ‘think locally’ when voting nationally. It tends to favour the election of well-
31 known or colourful local personalities who are seen as defending local interests. Often it
32 encourages maverick politicians, elected on a party list, to defy the party whip in defence of
33 local interests, knowing that, their reputation as a local hero thus secured, even if deselected
34 by their party they will be re-elected at the next election as an ‘independent’ and can
35 negotiate the terms of their re-entry to their party of origin – or continue with a successful
36 political career as an Independent. As Weeks points out (2009), the number of Independents
37 returned to the Irish parliament often is greater than the combined total returned to all other
38 West European parliaments taken together; their importance in Irish political life, therefore,
39 should not be underestimated. The latter refers to the tendency to favour the politics of
40 personality over that of ideology (or sometimes even party). An unknown candidate, perhaps
41 with weak local roots, has very little chance of success against a candidate with a strong
42 personal following, regardless of the appeal of ideology or political message. Both these
43 tendencies are encouraged by the Irish electoral system. The Single Transferable Vote (STV)
44 system of proportional representation forces candidates from the same political party to
45 compete against one another in multi-member constituencies and thus to build up personal
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3 machines. A major way in which Irish politicians do this is by emphasising their brokerage
4 role – their willingness to act as intermediaries between constituents and the bureaucracy,
5 helping to obtain for constituents their legal entitlements (Komito, 1984 and 1992). Such a
6 role, deemed by politicians to be essential to their (re-)election, can be enormously time-
7 consuming and leave little time or energy for initiating or supervising legislation or, in the
8 case of politicians attempting to create new, radical parties, the business of party-building.
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14 The ways in which STV combines with aspects of Irish political culture also makes it
15 difficult for new, radical or anti-system parties to emerge and transform the politics of street
16 protest into a challenge to the existing party system. At first sight, STV is obviously fairer
17 than, for example, a first-past-the-post electoral system; and might be deemed to facilitate
18 minority party representation (for a discussion of the STV electoral system see Farrell, 2011).
19 However, there is another side to this. First, new (and almost, by definition, small) anti-
20 system parties, in order to make an initial electoral break-through must rely upon building up
21 the profiles of popular local activists – and a small new party dominated by a handful of
22 well-known personalities can be prone to fissile tendencies. Second, STV allows voters, even
23 in times of mass alienation and disillusionment with traditional politics, to cast a first
24 preference (protest) vote for an Independent or new party candidate whilst reverting with
25 their second, third and fourth, etc., preferences to the party of their traditional allegiance.
26 Thus, attempts to subvert traditional party identifications are made more difficult. These
27 issues are crucial in understanding why the anti-austerity social movement in Ireland has not
28 yet produced a successful challenge to the party system. But they are not the only reasons, as
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42 **Socials movements in Ireland**

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45 According to Connolly and Hourigan (2006: 2-3) 'it is often inaccurately assumed
46 that N[ew] S[ocial] M[ovement]s could not and did not flourish in societies "like Ireland" (a
47 country with a small, predominantly rural, population on the periphery of Western Europe),
48 either before or after the 1960s, because of the social and political dominance of the Catholic
49 Church and its close relationship with the State.' However, as many of the contributors to
50 their edited volume make clear, this is far from being the truth. The power of the Catholic
51 Church over Irish society and politics has been 'a catalyst as well as a constraint' for the
52 emergence of social movements. Ireland has seen a large number of NSMs emerge and make
53 their impact on Irish societies since the 1960s. Examples have included: the Irish Women's
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3 Liberation Movement, launched in its modern form in 1970, which has campaigned for
4 gender equality in general but for the legalisation of contraception, divorce and abortion in
5 particular (for a full account of its emergence and campaigning activities see Stopper, 2006);
6 the Irish gay and lesbian liberation movement, which campaigned for several decades for the
7 decriminalisation of homosexuality and the enactment of full legal equality for all sexualities;
8 groups protesting against the marginalisation of the Irish language; environmental action and
9 anti-nuclear groups; anti-racism and anti-war groups; housing action and unemployment
10 action groups; and, of course, the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the very
11 variety of NSMs that has been part of the political landscape in Ireland since the 1960s points
12 to the problem of arriving at an agreed definition of NSM that can cover most, if not all, or
13 them.
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22 A 'health check' of Irish civic activism carried out by the think-tank, TASC, in 2007
23 paints a picture of a vibrant civil society with high levels of community activism, above all in
24 the voluntary sector. The report argues that 'Ireland shows higher levels of engagement in
25 informal social networks and community activism than the UK, higher levels of involvement
26 in membership organisations, and greater confidence that ordinary people can make a
27 difference to public decision making.' Moreover, it found that 'women were more likely than
28 men to be "community activists"' even though they were greatly under-represented in public
29 office (Hughes, et al., 2007: 440). The Irish [citizenrypeople](#), then, displays considerable
30 social capital accumulation and is far from being passive. However, until recently very few
31 social movements have directly challenged the neo-liberal consensus that has underpinned
32 Irish economic policy in recent decades – a consensus that has been shared by all three of the
33 Republic of Ireland's largest political parties. All of this was to change with what Laurence
34 Cox refers to as 'the movement of movements', a term he adopts to signify the 'coming
35 together of different groups, campaigns and individuals which have realised that their
36 different areas of concern – racism and war, economic exploitation and environmental
37 destruction, patriarchy and state power – are interlinked' (Cox, 2006: 212). The movement
38 of movements, or movement against capitalist globalisation, exploded upon the Irish political
39 scene in the early years of the twenty-first century, even when the so-called Celtic Tiger
40 economy was still in the ascendant. The catalyst may well have been the Iraq war, which
41 drew 100,000 on the streets of Dublin in 2003 in the largest demonstration seen for two
42 decades, and the visit of President George W. Bush to Ireland a year later, which again drew
43 tens of thousands on the streets in protest. But, quickly, the movement spread to encapsulate
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3 protest against economic inequality and what were perceived as the unfair nature of the neo-
4 liberal policies that underpinned the Celtic Tiger phenomenon. A genuinely popular
5 movement that challenged the neo-liberal consensus head-on was emerging, which would
6 later (after 2008) help give birth to a mass movement of anti-austerity activism.
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11 The first manifestation of this new wave of activism came with the anti-bin changes
12 movement in 2003. This followed the decision of local authorities in Ireland to introduce
13 additional charges for domestic refuse collection, which activists deemed to fall heaviest on
14 working class communities. A large number of local protest groups were formed, especially
15 in Dublin, and a campaign of non-payment, backed up by disruption of refuse collections and
16 blockades of bin lorries was launched. The campaign saw the imprisonment by the Irish
17 courts of 22 activists, including Joe Higgins, a parliamentary deputy (*Teachta Dála* – TD) for
18 the small Trotskyist Socialist Party, Clare Daly (later also to be elected a SP TD – and later
19 still an Independent left TD) and several activists of the Irish Socialist Network, a democratic
20 socialist splinter from the orthodox communist Workers' Party. Although ultimately a failure,
21 the anti-bin charges movement made household names in Dublin of several of those
22 imprisoned and can be seen as both paving the way for the modest electoral success that the
23 'hard left' would enjoy in the decade ahead as well as for the larger anti-austerity movement
24 that would emerge after 2008.
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35 **The Anti-austerity movement in Ireland, 2008-11**

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38 The Republic of Ireland officially entered recession in September 2008.
39 Unemployment soared, reaching 15.1 per cent by 2012. Large-scale emigration resumed.
40 Tens of thousands of families were left with crippling negative equity as house prices
41 slumped. The country was scarred by unfinished large suburban sink estates, and by huge
42 cuts to public spending. (See Dunphy, 2016, for a more detailed discussion of these points).
43 When the economic collapse occurred, Ireland was governed by the *Fianna Fáil* (FF) party, a
44 centre-right populist, nationalist and Catholic party with strong clientelist ties to the
45 construction and banking sectors, in coalition with a small Green Party. These parties
46 established a National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) in 2009, which effectively took
47 over the debts of a corrupt banking sector, sending the national debt spiralling upwards and
48 condemning future generations to pay off the private banking sector's debts. In December
49 2010, the Irish *Taoiseach* (prime minister), Brian Cowen, signed an Economic Adjustment
50 Programme with the Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank and
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3 International Monetary Fund). A Memorandum of Understanding, signed by the Irish
4 government, committed the country to adhere to 'tight supervision of expenditure
5 commitments' (IMF, 2011: 62). In practice, this involved agreement to impose an austerity
6 programme of public sector cuts, chiefly to health, education, pensions and social welfare, in
7 addition to introducing a household tax on every family who owned their own home, and
8 domestic water charges – all in return for a Troika loan of 85 billion Euros.
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14 In response to these developments, a truly mass anti-austerity protest movement
15 emerged, with small radical left parties, trade unions (or, at least, those which had broken
16 their traditional ties to the pro-austerity Labour Party), and numerous community and activist
17 groups participating. In 2010, 100,000 participated in one of the biggest demonstration ever
18 organised by Ireland's trade unions. 40,000 took part on student protests. An estimated
19 30,000 farmers took to the streets in protest. They were followed by teachers, civil servants,
20 police officers, taxi drivers and many groups that had not previously been drawn into political
21 protest. In 2011, Occupy camps were established in Dublin, Cork, Galway and Waterford,
22 emulating protest movements in other countries (Dunphy, 2016: 192). Yet, in the period,
23 2008-11, none of this activism or popular protest really impacted on the party political
24 system. At the level of party politics, the neo-liberal consensus seemed to hold. The three big
25 parties (and the Greens), which all backed austerity, continued to dominate political life.
26 Indeed, during the period 2008-13, Ireland 'was widely seen as a so-called poster child for
27 austerity', delivering swingeing cuts while minimising political protest and maintaining
28 political consensus (Dellepiane-Avellaneda and Hardiman, 2015: 209). Indeed, the
29 insensitivity of the Irish political elite to mass anti-austerity demands from below increased
30 the feeling of many activists that Ireland suffered from a dysfunctional political system; and
31 that the politicisation of public spaces, such as the streets and town squares, through mass
32 demonstrations and protest camps offered the only way of bringing the anti-austerity message
33 to ever greater numbers of people.
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48 The failure to translate mass anti-austerity activism into radical political change
49 during the period, 2008-11, was deeply disappointing to many activists. There are a number
50 of reasons as to why this happened. The Fianna Fáil party, which had dominated the political
51 life of Ireland for much of the period since the early 1930s, bore the brunt of voters' anger at
52 the 2011 general election, falling to 17 per cent (from around 40 per cent). But disillusioned
53 Irish voters turned, not so much to the radical left or even the nationalist-populist *Sinn Féin*
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(SF) , which sought to deploy anti-austerity rhetoric to harness support for its traditional project of a united Ireland, albeit in a somewhat inconsistent and vacillating way (see below for SF's contradictions on the water charges issue), as to the other big centre-right party *Fine Gael* (FG) and the centrist Labour Party, both of which, after the election, committed to the same austerity programme as FF. In part, this reflects the conservative nature of Irish political culture and the weakness of any radical left in Ireland. In part, it is because the two small radical left parties that played such a prominent role in the anti-austerity movement – the Socialist Party, which began fighting elections under the banner of the Anti-Austerity Alliance (AAA), and the Socialist Workers' Party, which did the same under the banner of the People Before Profit Alliance (PBPA) – were riven by internecine sectarian rivalries; and, according to some activists and trade union leaders outside the ranks of these parties, both gained a reputation within the wider anti-austerity movement for extreme political dogmatism and sectarian posturing. In particular, the SP/AAA was suspected of trying to destroy any movement that it could not control (Ogle, 2016, Collins, 2015 and 2016). According to Brendan Ogle (a Unite union leader who played a prominent role in the movement), 'I often got the impression that [the SP/AAA] saw in any mass movement that they could not control the spectre of reformism (Ogle, 2016). The SP/AAA resented the presence within the movement of SF, which it suspected of trying to subordinate anti-austerity activism to bourgeois nationalism and of trying to capture the leadership of the movement (Coppinger, 2015). These divisions, mutual suspicions and rival leadership aspirations considerably weakened the chances of a new political phenomenon emerging from the ranks of the anti-austerity movement in the run-up to the 2011 general election.

Table 1: Summary of 2011 Irish General Election results (with 2009 results for comparison)

Party	% of votes	Seats in Dáil	2009 election %	2009 seats
FG	36.1	76	27.3	51
Labour	19.4	37	10.1	20
FF	17.4	20	41.6	77
SF	9.9	14	6.9	4
Marxist parties*	2.7	5	1.3	0
Greens	1.8	0	4.7	6
Independents	12.7	14	8.1	8
total	100	166	100	166

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3 *Socialist Party (1.2% - 2 seats), People Before Profit Alliance (1% - 2 seats), Unemployed Workers'
4 Action Group (0.4% - 1 seat), Workers' Party (0.1% - 0 seats)
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7 Table 1 demonstrates the extent to which mass agitation had failed to unsettle traditional Irish
8 voters' behaviour after three years of austerity. The important point to note here is that at the
9 general election of 2009, the four parties that explicitly implemented and defended austerity
10 policies – FF, FG, Labour and Greens - had polled 83.7 percent and won 154 seats out of 166.
11 In 2011, these same parties polled 74.7 per cent and won 133 seats out of 166. In fact, these
12 figures underestimate the neo-liberal consensus as between one-third and one-half of the
13 Independents elected on both occasions also shared in it. Despite the collapse of FF, the
14 election represented, in the words of Shaun McDaid, 'a redistribution of the existing party
15 system, rather than its "destruction"' (McDaid, 2016: 190). The decision by the Labour Party
16 to form a coalition with FG further blocked any left-versus-right realignment in Irish politics
17 and guaranteed 'business as usual' since non-FF coalitions have always revolved around FG
18 and Labour (McDaid, 2016: 191). These points are important because, as Doreen Massey has
19 argued, 'An economic crisis is not enough. You also need a fracturing of the ideological and
20 the political ... because one of the main bases of the ideological hegemony of neoliberalism
21 is the way in which it removes the economic from political and ideological contest, the way
22 in turns the economic into a matter of technocratic expertise' (Massey, 2015: 13-4).
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35 **The Anti-austerity movement in Ireland after 2011**

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38 In the aftermath of the 2011 general election in Ireland, anti-austerity social protests
39 were both stepped up, drawing yet greater numbers of previously unpoliticised people into
40 politics, and the movement, at the same time, began to take on new directions, partly
41 influenced by activism elsewhere. On 22 December 2011, the Campaign Against Home and
42 Water Taxes (CAHWT) was launched, supported by the small radical left parties,
43 independent left parliamentary deputies and some members of SF. Above all, it would be the
44 issue of water charges that would galvanise the movement and rally mass public support.
45 Mass grassroots community activism included resisting meter installation and boycotting
46 registration. The CAHWT called for a boycott of household and water taxes, established a
47 national anti-household tax helpline, and organised protests in every major town and city in
48 Ireland. However, the CAHWT found itself badly divided by the SP/AAA's insistence on
49 non-payment of household charges even though the government had enabled legislation
50 allowing payment to be deducted from wages or welfare payments. Critics of the SP/AAA
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3 argued that this tactic risked plunging many people into debt and hardship (Ogle, 2016). The
4 internal difficulties faced by the CAHWT risked leaving large numbers of activists feeling
5 disillusioned – and, arguably, paved the way for the emergence of the separate and distinctive
6 Right2Water campaign (see below).
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11 Finn (2015: 49) claims that Irish political elites and Troika officials who favourably
12 compared the 'solid, dependable Irish, who would do as they were told and ask for nothing in
13 return' with the troublesome Greeks were taken 'entirely by surprise' by the new and more
14 forceful wave of anti-austerity activism. Acts of civil disobedience and grass roots activism
15 followed in many Irish towns that had never seen protests against neo-liberalism before, with
16 over 100,000 marching against the bank debts in February 2013, and the launch of the
17 Right2Water campaign in late 2014 leading to further mass protests throughout 2014-16.
18 Indeed, the period since 2014 has seen the biggest protests and water charges has proven to
19 be the issue that has acted as a focal point for the entire anti-austerity movement in Ireland.
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27 Ireland formally exited the Economic Adjustment Programme in late 2013 and exited
28 the recession in 2014 when it returned to modest economic growth. The ruling coalition of
29 FG and Labour proudly boasted that its pursuit of austerity had been a success, and Labour
30 privately hoped that the exit from recession might be in time to save it from political
31 meltdown at the next election (which was held in 2016). On the contrary, anti-austerity
32 protests underwent an 'eruption' in late 2014 (Finn, 2015: 49). Although unemployment fell
33 from nearly 15 per cent in 2012 to 10 per cent in summer 2015, mass emigration was behind
34 this fall. According to Finn (2015: 50-1), nearly 475,000 workers left the country between
35 2008 and 2014, a higher rate of emigration than the Baltic states, and without which
36 unemployment in Ireland would have reached Spanish and Greek levels. The recovery, then,
37 was 'partial and tentative' and left much of the population unaffected. The Government
38 established Irish Water in 2013 with plans to introduce charges for domestic consumption of
39 water in 2014. By taking responsibility for such charges out of the hands of local authorities
40 and placing them in the hands of a company, the government was clearly, in many people's
41 eyes, preparing for the privatisation of water, thus removing Irish Water's borrowings from
42 the state's books. Finn argues that Government's handling of this issue contributed to the
43 anti-water charges campaign becoming the focal point of the entire movement. First, the
44 introduction of water charges had the effect of targeting a wide range of different social
45 groups simultaneously and thus forcing them to coalesce. Second, the decision to award a
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3 contract to install water meters to a company owned by one of the country's wealthiest and
4 most controversial businessmen, Denis O'Brien, provoked widespread anger. Third, Irish
5 Water's decision to spend 85 million Euros on consultant fees generated public anger over
6 perceived corporate greed (Finn, 2015: 54-5). Right2Water was launched in September 2014,
7 with two of the big trade unions most autonomous from the Labour Party, Mandate and
8 Unite, playing a large role. A march in Dublin in October brought 100,000 on to the streets
9 with 200,000 taking part in national marches in November. A parliamentary by-election in
10 Dublin South West in October was fought almost entirely on the issue: the Socialist Party
11 won the seat, defeating Sinn Féin, which had been expected to take the seat. Although both
12 parties had declared support for Right2Water, the SP called uncompromisingly for a boycott
13 of water charge payments which SF did not – only reversing its position in the wake of by-
14 election defeat. The message was clear: in working class constituencies in particular, the
15 water charges movement had unleashed fierce anti-austerity anger.
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26 Rory Hearne, in his detailed study of the Irish anti-war charges movementⁱ, reports
27 that the mass nature of the protests was fuelled by a sense of anger, desperation, real life
28 suffering and a sense that austerity had 'gone too far'. Moreover, he claims that austerity 'had
29 reached a tipping point in 2013 and 2014 ... and ... had extended out to impact a broad
30 section of the population by the end of the troika bailout' (Hearne, 2015: 9).
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35 In early 2015, some of those involved in the campaign, inspired by the renewed and
36 seemingly redoubled energy of the social activism, felt that the time was ripe to enter the
37 electoral arena. Hearne's study of those involved in the anti-water charges movement lends
38 support to their view, in that he found that 79.5 per cent of activists taking part in his survey
39 felt that there was a need for a new political party in Ireland (Hearne, 2015: 25). He argues
40 that this is consistent with polls showing high levels of disillusionment with existing parties,
41 even amongst those who continue to vote for them, and the fact that many people who had
42 begun voting for Sinn Féin or the Trotskyist parties were still looking for a new alternative
43 that might better represent their views. Hearne conclude that 'it is clear that the respondents
44 want a new party that stands on a platform of anti-austerity; is for radical political reform
45 involving a "clearing out" of the "establishment" political parties from power; that is anti-
46 corruption, anti-cronyism and for democracy where government acts for the people and not
47 the elite or "golden circle" ... (Hearne, 2015: 26-7).
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3 With a general election due in early 2016, some activists felt that this time, perhaps, it
4 would be possible to challenge the political and electoral consensus around neo-liberalism
5 and give Ireland what it had never had in its history – a left-of-centre government that would
6 reject austerity and stand up to the demands of the Troika. Under trade union leadership, a
7 conference was held to transform Right2Water into Right2Change – a broader-based political
8 movement that published a list of principles that should underpin a progressive Irish
9 government (see next section, for a detailed discussion of this). Boosted by Irish Water’s
10 admission in July 2015 that less than 50 per cent of Irish households had paid the water
11 charges, and by further mass rallies and demonstration at the end of the summer, they
12 focussed on the forthcoming election. The electoral strategy was nebulous, however, with no
13 clear agreement on whether a new political formation, along the lines of either *Syriza* or
14 *Podemos*, was needed; moreover, divisions between supporters of the Trotskyist parties and
15 others, and between SF supporters and others, and disagreement over how to interpret the
16 lessons to be learned from other countries’ experience, all hampered the initiative. In the
17 event, all that could be managed was agreement to invite existing parties and Independents to
18 sign up to supporting the principles behind Right2Change. SF, the PBPA and many left
19 Independents did so; the SP/AAA declined. Candidates and parties who agreed to sign up
20 were further divided over whether they featured the common principles prominently (or at
21 all) in their electoral campaign. For example, neither the PBPA manifesto (PBPA, 2016) nor
22 the joint declaration of common principles by the AAA and PBPA (AAA/PBPA, 2016) made
23 any reference to the Right2Change principles. Nor did Sinn Féin electoral propaganda made
24 any reference to the campaign (Ogle, 2016).
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41 As Table 2 demonstrates, the 2016 general election saw a modest advance by the
42 Trotskyist parties, a significant advance by SF on the basis of that party’s espousal of anti-
43 austerity rhetoric (which was nonetheless less than SF had hoped for), and a big advance by
44 the Independents grouping which now included a recently formed radical left,
45 Independents4Change group of parliamentary deputies, most of whom had been prominent in
46 the anti-austerity social movements. And yet, no convincing, united or coherent new force
47 has burst on to the party political scene. The parties favouring austerity – FF, FG, Labour,
48 Greens and *Renua* – polled 61.4 per cent and won 103 seats out of 158. These figures are
49 again boosted by the fact that many Independents are centre-right or centrist and favour
50 austerity also. The consensus around neoliberalism was badly dented by the 2016 election –
51 but still not fractured. Nevertheless, Mary Murphy has argued that voting figures disguise the
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fact that levels of trust in politics, traditional parties and the institutions of government are low; and that, with a values-led discourse that challenges neoliberalism, a mass movement for change that emphasises gender and social reproduction issues, environmental concerns and concerns over social justice and income inequality, might yet mobilise a wide range of actors, create new alliances, and change the political system (Murphy, 2016). In other words, the outcome of the 2016 general election by no means marks the exhaustion of the movement ~~foref~~ change in Ireland.

In the next section, we will explore the extent to which the Irish anti-austerity movement has been able to incorporate lessons from abroad – and the reasons why an Irish *Podemos* has, so far at least, failed to emerge.

Table 2: Summary of 2016 Irish General Election results

Party	% of votes	Seats in Dáil
FG	25.5	50
Labour	6.6	7
FF	24.4	44
SF	13.9	23
Marxist parties(a)	3.9	6
Greens	2.7	2
Independents(b)	17.8	23
Renua(c)	2.2	0
Social Democrats(c)	3.0	3
total	100	158(d)

(a)The AAA and the PBPA presented a joint list at the 2016 elections, despite publishing separate election manifestos.

(b)Independents includes the left-wing, anti-austerity Independents4Change group.

(c)Renua and the Social Democrats are two new parties, of the centre-right and centre-left respectively.

(d) Total number of parliamentary seats reduced from 166 to 158 in 2016.

From a New Way of Doing Politics to a New Political Formation?

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3 As we have seen, the period since 2014 saw an up-turn in anti-austerity protests in Ireland
4 with the Right2Water campaign giving birth to a broader Right2Change movement in 2015.
5 Many of those involved in Right2Change have explicitly acknowledged the importance of the
6 Spanish and Greek examples and have tried to draw political lessons from the experiences of
7 other countries. In Spain, *Podemos* grew out of a broad-based citizens and democracy
8 movement and registered as a political party in March 2014. As Heilig (2016: 22) argues,
9 *Podemos* had its origins 'in the manifesto "*Mover ficha: convertir la indignación en cambio*
10 *político*" ("Make a move: turn indignation into political change'). The manifesto was signed
11 by around 30 intellectuals, cultural figures, journalists, and social activists, who pointed to
12 the necessity of fielding candidates for the European Parliament in order to oppose EU
13 austerity policy at the European level as well. Some of the emphasised programmatic points
14 were the redistribution of wealth in Spain from top to bottom, the maintenance of the public
15 character of education and healthcare, the raising of salaries, the creation of a stock of public
16 housing, as well as resistance to the tightening of Spain's abortion legislation. The movement
17 also demanded Spain's exit from NATO'. The influence of this manifesto on the
18 Right2Change movement, launched in early 2015 can be readily seen in its founding
19 document, *Policy Principles for a Progressive Irish Government* (see Right2Water, 2015).
20 This, too, was a manifesto in embryonic form that echoed many of the founding demands of
21 *Podemos*. It went beyond the water charges issue to call for:
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- 36 • **A Right2Jobs and Decent Work** including the introduction of a Decent Work Act
37 that tackled low pay and precarity, introduced a Living Wage, enshrined the right to
38 collective bargaining in law, and strengthened the social protection system by
39 bringing in pay-related benefits and childcare payments;
- 40 • **A Right2Housing** that called for new legislation that waged war on homelessness and
41 provided for the construction of new social housing, regulated rents and non-
42 speculative house building;
- 43 • **A Right2Health** involving the creation of 'a universal health care system free at the
44 point of entry';
- 45 • **A Right2Debt Justice** that would see the convening of a European Debt Conference
46 to restructure sovereign debt throughout the Eurozone, the introduction of a Financial
47 Transaction Tax to repay states that had written off private banks' debts and a 'state
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led and democratically accountable programme of restructuring and writing down of mortgage debt’;

- **A Right2Education** that would see massive investment in education and the reduction of class sizes from among the highest to the lowest levels in the EU;
- **A Right2Democratic Reform** that would seek to reform and reinvigorate political decision-making process, local and national, by giving citizens the right of recall of their elected representatives, allowing citizens to propose constitutional changes and referenda on legislation, measures to relax the party Whip system and to strengthen parliamentary committees from party patronage, and – a measure that chimes well with *Podemos*’s populist attacks on *The Caste* – the introduction of breathalysers ahead of votes in parliament.

In the case of the Irish manifesto, the initiative had been taken largely by the trade unions, Mandate and Unite. Perhaps for this reason, and in support of their call for maximum participation in both the political system and the process of formulating a full programme for a new type of politics, the document was declared to be intended ‘to begin a discussion about what type of society we want to live in. Contributions to the discussion were invited from all interested individuals and groups, and a further conference was called by the Unions for 13 June.

As we will see, one of the groups within the movement most open to studying the lessons of Spain and Greece was the groups of Independent left parliamentary deputies, chief amongst them Clare Daly and Joan Collins. Both these deputies had risen to prominence, long before their election to the Irish parliament, as leading activists in the anti-austerity protest movement; and both had resigned or been expelled from the two small Trotskyist parties – Daly from the SP/AAA and Collins from first the SP and then the PBPA – which they came to see as sectarian, dogmatic, and an obstacle to further progress by the anti-austerity movement. In a contribution to the Right2Change debate (issued as United Left, a name they briefly used) these activists and parliamentary deputies echoed that ‘a radical mass movement in Ireland has to link up with similar movements in Europe, such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain’. They called for a new vision for the European Union – as opposed to the Trotskyist parties’ uncompromising call for Ireland to leave the EU. Indeed, it should be noted that during

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3 the United Kingdom's referendum on Brexit, the PBPA was the only non-Unionist party
4 represented in the Northern Irish Legislative Assembly that campaigned in favour of
5 Brexit (McCann, 2016). Acknowledging that 'one of the more significant movements
6 against austerity in Europe since the onset of the economic crisis ... has the potential to
7 be the key factor in the development of a new and mass radical left movement', they
8 emphasised that such a development would take time, would not emerge in time for the
9 2016 elections, and would need to learn from experiences elsewhere in Europe. A new
10 formation would have to repudiate any coalition with FF, FG or Labour and act
11 autonomously. Echoing *Podemos*'s manifesto, they called for strong opposition to
12 NATO, repeal of Ireland's constitutional ban on abortion, separation of Church and State,
13 and public ownership of some of the leading banks (United Left, 2015).
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23 From the outset, the organisers of Right2Water invited representatives from the social
24 movements in, for example, Greece, Spain and Germany to address rallies in Ireland.
25 According to Brendan Ogle, ~~one of the~~ trade union leaders who played a key and pivotal
26 role in organising the subsequent Right2Change movement, Irish activists had engaged in
27 new tactics and methods of challenging the political establishment, but lacked any clear
28 structure. Above all, they struggled to find mechanisms of democratic input (Ogle, 2016).
29 Irish trade unions had traditionally abstained from any involvement with social activism;
30 indeed, their involvement in social partnership programmes with successive Irish
31 governments had led, in the eyes of left-wing critics, to their virtual cooption as part of
32 the state apparatus (see Allen (2000) for an espousal of this view). Social Partnership
33 Agreements have operated in Ireland since 1987, and have involved leading trade unions,
34 farmers' and employers' organisations and the government meeting regularly, under the
35 auspices of the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) to discuss targets for
36 wages, prices and fiscal stability, for example (Coakley and Gallagher, 2010: 336-40).
37 Ogle argues that the social partnership agreements, especially recently, have contributed
38 to a progressive ~~DE-deradicalisation~~ of trade unions and an abandonment of any real
39 oppositional stance (Ogle, 2016) Those unions most critical of 'institutionalisation' –
40 Mandate and Unite – now found themselves thrust into a leadership role almost by
41 accident. In the aftermath of the local and European elections in June 2014, a conference
42 was held, attended by the unions, community activists' groups and the parties – SF, SP,
43 PBPA, and Left independents. Ogle describes the atmosphere amongst the politicians as
44 'poisonous', with the two Trotskyist parties allegedly blaming each other for lack of
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3 success in the European elections, and both highly suspicious of SF. The unions, he
4 claims, stepped forward at this juncture and offered to design the subsequent
5 Right2Change campaign. For trade unions, this was a new departure. The relationship
6 between unions and the new social movements has not always been an easy one. Unite
7 (UK) spokesperson, Simon Dubbins, in conversation with Doreen Massey, admits that
8 unions have been slow to engage with the Occupy movement and are accustomed to
9 dealing with formal structures and leadership elites – and so are sometimes uneasy with
10 informal, grass roots-led movements. Learning different methods and different ways of
11 `doing` democracy is often a steep learning curve for those who come from this tradition
12 (Massey, 2015: 26). It might be argued that in Ireland, union leadership of the
13 Right2Water and Right2Change campaigns carried risks of stultifying grass roots energy
14 as well as new challenges.
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24 Ogle argues that the unions looked outside Ireland for inspiration, sending
25 representatives to attend conferences in Marseilles, Thessaloniki, Berlin and Brussels.
26 They sought to establish links with north American campaigns, seeking to learn from the
27 Detroit Water brigade that campaigned against water shut-offs, and linking up with
28 Canadian activists such as Maude Barlow's Blue Planet Project. Right2Change then, as
29 we have seen, was launched with a statement of common principles for a progressive
30 government. All of this, together with the invitations to representatives from the
31 European movements to address rallies and demonstrations in Ireland, can be seen as a
32 conscious effort to create the sort of transnational European sphere that Thomas Risse
33 (2010) talks of. Risse mentions five criteria for the existence of such a sphere: visibility of
34 common themes, common criteria of relevance, speakers engaging in cross-border
35 debates, speakers from different countries recognising each other as legitimate
36 interlocutors, and speakers framing the issues at stake as common European problems
37 (Risse, 2010: 126). There can be no doubt that all of these criteria were present in Ireland,
38 certainly during the second main wave of anti-austerity activism since 2014.
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51 What Ogle describes as the `dysfunctional` nature of the Irish left parties (Ogle, 2016)
52 – their alleged dogmatism and tendency towards in-fighting – helps explain why many
53 activists were attracted, not only by new ways of intervening in politics but by the idea of
54 a new political formation. Right2Change's first major conference was attended by
55 representatives from *Podemos*, *Syriza* and the Berlin water charges protest movement.
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3 The Podemos representative defended ~~his~~the movement's presentation of itself as 'neither
4 left nor right' and urged Irish activists to look beyond old ways of thinking and to develop
5 new mechanisms of ensuring mass, democratic participation in politics. While such
6 messages were welcomed by some activists, they were anathema to others.
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11 The two Trotskyist parties in Ireland have drawn rather different lessons from Europe.
12 In their view, the anti-austerity movement can only advance and succeed if it is under the
13 leadership of a Marxist-Leninist vanguard party. Otherwise, it runs the risk of two forms
14 of 'betrayal'. First, it risks falling into a form of populism – defined as 'lacking a clear
15 political programme as your backbone' and lacking a class perspective (Fitzgerald,
16 2015a). The charge of populism is one that the SP explicitly levels against those left
17 independents most favourably disposed to *Podemos* – and, by implication, at *Podemos*
18 itself. Second, it runs the risk of working within the capitalist system and thus leading the
19 working class to defeat, as, they argue, has happened with *Syriza* (Murphy, 2015).
20 According to the PBPA's Kieran Allen, 'Syriza embraces a reformist strategy ... it
21 operates within the framework of capitalism ... at the core of its strategy was a belief that
22 the machinery of the state could be used to ameliorate the lives of workers' (Allen, 2015).
23 *Syriza* and *Podemos* were therefore examples of what not to do.
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35 Moreover, the rules of both parties prevent them from participation in any
36 government that includes 'pro-capitalist' or reformist parties (which include Labour and
37 the Greens and possibly SF, depending on how SF evolves in the years ahead). Thus, after
38 months of wrangling, the SP/AAA withdrew from the Right2Change discussions
39 altogether. The PBPA signed up to the principles but remains hostile to any new political
40 formation which it cannot control; and determined to remain aloof from any coalition,
41 according to one of its recently-elected TDs, Gino Kelly, who adds that 'any new
42 formation arising from that [Right2Change] is likely to be reformist, not revolutionary,
43 and we don't believe that Ireland needs another reformist party' (Kelly, 2016).
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51 SF is also hostile to the emergence of any new political formation and seeks to draw
52 upon the energy of the anti-austerity movement to increase its own electoral fortunes.
53 Indeed, SF sees itself as the Irish equivalent of *Podemos*, already formed. This claim is
54 made explicitly in SF campaign leaflets in 2015: 'In Spain, it is called *Podemos*, in
55 Greece, *Syriza*, and in Ireland, Sinn Féin' (cited in Dunphy, 2016: 204-5). However,
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3 many anti-austerity and left activists outside of SF's ranks have three problems with this
4 claim. First, they see SF as a nationalist party, much more than a left party. Second, its
5 ministers in coalition government in Northern Ireland have actually implemented
6 austerity politics and, in the Republic, it has positioned itself in recent years for possible
7 participation in coalition government with Fianna Fáil (Daly, 2015, McCann, 2016).
8 Third, they see its future political direction – leftwards or rightwards – as being as yet
9 undecided. Anti-austerity activist and Independent left TD (and ex-SF member), Thomas
10 Pringle, declares that SF 'has no internal democracy at all and is completely focussed on
11 getting into power.' (Pringle, 2015).
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20 Some Left independent deputies tend to be amongst those most open to a new
21 political formation. According to Clare Daly, 'the *Syriza* model, with political elites from
22 a number of different parties building a new formation from the top down, would never
23 work in Ireland. It will have to be the *Podemos* model – building from the grass roots up.
24 A huge number want something different. A vanguard party is completely out of date and
25 can only dissipate the energies of the movement' (Daly, 2015). Daly is clearly referring
26 here to the fact that *Syriza*, unlike, *Podemos*, 'did not come out of the [social]
27 movements' but pre-dated them and was formed by existing political parties and elites
28 (Massey, 2015: 17). By contrast, *Podemos* was formed by people who had 'come from
29 social movements, and the demands and lessons from the squares have been incorporated
30 into *Podemos*'s ideas, structures, and mechanism.' As *Podemos* member Sirio Canos
31 Donnay explains, in conversation with Doreen Massey, 'anybody, even if they belong to
32 another party, can join one of its locally-held, horizontally-organised meetings, and vote
33 in its internal processes.' Moreover, it is a loose-knit organisation, without formal
34 membership or fees, which tries to stay close to its grass roots origins, with maximum
35 discussion of policies, programmes and principles and open votes on strategies and
36 coalitions (Massey, 2015: 21-2). ~~Q~~Moreover, online registration allows permanent
37 participation with a personal voting code, and the tactic of 'drawing nebulous borders
38 between the inside and the outside of the party' helped increase membership to nearly
39 400,000 within a year, facilitating a truly mass mobilisation of energies (Della Porta, et
40 al., 2017: 78-9). Clearly, it is this loose-knit, bottom-up approach to building a new
41 political organisation that some activists felt most appropriate to the Irish context – as
42 opposed to either the 'democratic centralist' model of the Leninists (and, arguably, Sinn
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3 Féin) or the idea of creating another top-down party like the others (as arguably happened
4 when three Independent TDs created the Social Democrats in July 2015.
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8 For Thomas Pringle TD, increasing democratic participation and control is the key.
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10 `We have to learn from *Podemos* and do something similar. The mobilisation against
11 austerity has made people more open to alternatives' (Pringle, 2015). These views are
12 echoed by Deputy Joan Collins: `we need a new political movement, linked to the unions
13 and the social movements, and built from the grass roots up' (Collins, 2015). (Of course,
14 it could be argued that Syriza's radicalism has been tempered if not indeed broken in
15 Greece, and that *Podemos* has reached a ceiling in Spain without being capable of
16 delivering its promise to unseat the ruling `caste' and fundamentally upset the Spanish
17 party system. But the formidable obstacles in the way of new political forces turning anti-
18 austerity activism into successful challenges to the political system is another story).
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26 In the aftermath of the disappointing 2016 general election, activists were adamant
27 that the conditions for a new politics were still ripening. Three pillars of the anti-austerity
28 movement were identified: the trade unions, the politicians (very divided, as we have
29 seen, over the extent to which a new formation was desirable or possible), and the
30 community activists and grass roots groups. According to Ogle (2016) and Collins
31 (2016), the community activists who form the third pillar of the movement in this analysis
32 constitute, in some ways, both its greatest potential strength and its potential weakness, in
33 that they often lack the necessary skills and experiences in dealing with professional
34 politicians and bureaucrats and may be open to manipulation or disillusionment. In 2015
35 and 2016, both the Unite union and the Left independents sought to strength the third
36 pillar, fearing that its relative weakness might imperil the project of encouraging new
37 forms of democratic participation and control. Unite has organised two- and three- day
38 long education workshops on political economy for non-party [c€Community](#) and anti-
39 austerity activists, not wanting them to be at a disadvantage (Ogle, 2016). By the summer
40 of 2016, Ogle claims, a democratic structure in the [c€Community](#) pillar was beginning to
41 emerge, although it remains unclear as to how this claim may be verified. All future
42 scenarios remained under review, including the possibility of a new party, in which some
43 members of the Independents4Change group that had emerged in parliament might play a
44 role.
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3 The Independents4Change group remains fairly heterogeneous, however. Not all of its
4 members believe that a new party can succeed. One of those who is most favourably
5 disposed to the idea – Deputy Joan Collins - decided to use part of her salary as a
6 parliamentary deputy to pay for a young Unite activist to work for the ~~e~~Community pillar
7 of the anti-austerity movement, touring the country to organise grass roots groups. The
8 goal is to sustain and expand community activism and democratic participation in
9 generating new ideas about politics by focussing on specific actions – such as the national
10 rallies on 17 September 2016, the most recent (at time of writing) mass demonstrations by
11 the Right2Water campaign. For Collins, ‘the aim now is to set up a movement for social
12 change – not a party yet. That has to emerge organically’ (Collins, 2016).

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20 Clearly, the relationship between social movements and political parties is, as Della
21 Porta, *et alia* (2017) make clear, a complex and multi-faceted one. Citing McAdam and
22 Tarrow (2010), they mention six forms that this relationship can take: ‘Movements
23 introduce new forms of collective action that influence election campaigns. Movements
24 join electoral coalitions or, in extreme cases, turn into parties themselves. Movements
25 engage in proactive electoral mobilization. Movements engage in reactive electoral
26 mobilization. Movements polarize political parties internally’ (Della Porta, et alia, 2017:
27 3-4). The Right2Change movement has attempted the first of these but with limited
28 success. Some activists continue to hope that conditions may yet facilitate the birth of a
29 new party that can express the hopes and aspirations of part of the social movement, at
30 least.

31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 **Conclusion**

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43 This paper has sought to understand why the anti-austerity movement in Ireland has
44 not yet succeeded in effecting more far-reaching and wide-ranging change to the party
45 system, and how some activists within the movement have sought to learn lessons from
46 activists in other countries, above all Spain and Greece. The relative failure to date by
47 what is arguably the biggest, most sustained and most vibrant mass social movement that
48 Ireland has yet seen, to really shake the political system is due to numerous factors. The
49 conservative nature of Irish political culture, the operations of the STV electoral system in
50 a country dominated by traditions of personalism and localism, the weakness of the Irish
51 left, the self-interest of existing parties involved in anti-austerity activism, and political
52 divisions amongst activists have all contributed to this relative failure. Nevertheless many
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3 activists in all three pillars of the Irish movement – trade union, politicians and
4 communist grass roots activists – have looked abroad, to Europe and to north America,
5 for lessons to be learned. While it is difficult to assess just how direct the influence of
6 groups like *Podemos* has been, it is clear that many activists have absorbed some central
7 lessons from aboard. These include the necessity to sustain and increase mass democratic
8 participation in politics, and the desirability of creating new mechanisms of democratic
9 control and accountability. In addition, the anti-austerity protest movement in Ireland has
10 seen Ireland consciously join in the creation of a transnational European space, with
11 activists and leading speakers from other countries invited to Ireland to address mass
12 rallies of activists, and Irish representatives attending conferences and rallies elsewhere in
13 Europe. This awakening of a political awareness that activists need to look beyond a
14 ‘blocked’ Irish party system and address common European problems in a common
15 language with activists from other countries is something relatively new in Ireland and its
16 full ramifications have yet to be realised. Whether or not a new political party emerges
17 organically from the anti-austerity movement, and what the prospects might be for such a
18 new party if it did emerge, are open questions. But the Irish anti-austerity movement, now
19 well into its second decade, has not yet exhausted its potential to surprise and innovate
20 and has already injected new thinking about politics into Irish society.
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36 Acknowledgements

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38 The author would like to acknowledge the cooperation of the following who agreed to
39 be interviewed: Joan Collins TD (ex-SP, ex-PBPA, now Left independent –
40 Independents4Change), Ruth Coppinger TD (SP/AAA), Clare Daly TD (ex-SP/AAA, now
41 Left independent – Independents4Change), Gino Kelly TD (PBPA), Eamon McCann MLA
42 (Member of the Legislative Assembly of Northern Ireland – PBPA), Thomas Pringle TD (ex-
43 SF, now Left independent – Independents4Change), and Brendan Ogle, full-time official with
44 Unite – the Union and key figure behind the Right2Change campaign, and three other anti-
45 austerity movement activists who requested anonymity..
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