



Ivana Bacik

THREE YEARS ago, Ivana Bacik became the sixth leader of the Labour Party in 20 years and last November its members hoped that its electoral seat gains – from six TDs to 11 – meant that the party had turned a corner following its disastrous term in coalition from 2011-16. But the root problem that produced Labour’s post-2016 electoral rejection – an addiction to coalition with one of the centre-right parties – appears to still shackle Bacik and the party. An opportunity to break out of this self-imposed isolation has now arrived, with widespread discussion on the left for a united alternative to Fianna Fáil/Fine Gael/Michael Lowry. After a mere four months in power, that axis comes over as flaccid, untrustworthy and incompetent. But has Ivana got the mettle to go for it?

Bacik may present as an ephemeral creature with no political steel or ruthlessness but she has shown herself able to get down and dirty when necessary. Consider how macho man Alan ‘AK47’ Kelly was ousted as leader of Labour in 2022 after just two years in the post.

Another surprising act of opportunism – or what a party apparatchik might term ‘realpolitik’ – came during the local elections last summer when Labour’s candidate in Ringsend, Dublin, Carol Reynolds, was interviewed on video by far-right anti-immigrant campaigner Gavin Pepper. Among other contentious remarks, Reynolds told the accommodating Pepper that Ireland had “too many immigrants” who viewed the country as “Treasure Island”.

After a party inquiry, however, Bacik said Reynolds would remain a party candidate. Apparently, Carol had been “misrepresented” by the “edited” video.

But the most disingenuous sleight of hand Bacik ever pulled was in 2016 when, as party leader in the Seanad, she was steering austerity junkie Brendan Howlin’s stringent measures through the house. Especially damaging to Labour and Bacik’s vaunted image as defenders of women, she guided through party leader Joan Burton’s infamous legislation that financially penalised lone parents whose

children reached the ripe old age of seven.

Aware that many women activists had turned up in the chamber to witness her dish it to the government, Bacik’s tone, body language and facial expressions gave the impression of serious distaste at the very measure she was piloting through the Seanad – a dramatic stunt that enraged many women.

As in the Seanad farce, Bacik’s performative behaviour in an RTÉ interview about the coup against Kelly missed the point and the problems facing Labour.

The problem was not Kelly’s brash personality, as many in the media were briefed, but the more political fact that the party that once rested on two national constituencies – middle-class liberals and working-class trade unionists and labourers – abandoned the latter in favour of the former. This was partly because of what Labour

thought was a necessary financial blitz of IDF proportions against its own working-class voters but also because a mammoth qualitative survey told them the party had lost this base and that it was not coming back any time soon; furthermore, its only potential growth area was among women and a soft FG vote.

This was born the ludicrous slogan of then

leader Eamon Gilmore – that gay marriage is “the civil rights issue of our generation” – in the most diverting and misleading soundbite of modern Irish politics, which was accompanied by an intense focus on social issues as opposed to housing, wages and proper public services.

ELECTORAL COMPETITION

If Bacik and others around her had any awareness of this isolating political process, they have shown little sign of acting on it. Labour’s current mission statement declares boldly and shamelessly that “from 2011-2016, Labour in government prioritised the rights and needs of workers. The biggest priority was to get people back to work.”

It goes on to say the party had reversed previous FF government cuts to the minimum wage. In the relevant period FF published a list of cuts and cost increases introduced by Labour and FG – 25 in all – including disability allowances, child benefit cuts (three), medical cards and a host of other measures that still resonate.

Bacik is not unique among Labour leaders, all of whom have gone along with the more centre-right measures and programmes of their coalition partners in FF or FG and who could not see beyond partnership with their bigger and better in these parties. But in the past Labour could expect that, after a punishing term in government, the party would be forgiven and voted once again into coalition government. That was when there was little or no electoral competition on the left but the growth in the last decade or so of firstly Sinn Féin, then the far left and the Social Democrats has changed all that.

The latter party and SF have taken much of Labour’s actual or potential vote. Between 2020 and early 2023 the Soc Dems and Labour were neck and neck in the polls, scoring somewhere around 4% each on average, until Holly Cairns took over the leadership of the Soc Dems in March 2023 and that party inched ahead, underlining its new, youthful image.

Last November’s election showed the Soc Dems on 4.8% and Labour on 4.7%, with both parties taking 11 seats each. SF took 39 seats; the radical left has five; Aontú has two; and the Green Party one. That means a combined left vote (including Aontú) has just under 70 seats compared with FF/FG on 86.

A feature of the last election for SF was its failure to realise its full potential (plus an erosion due to right-wing, ‘nativist’ voters defecting). In the same way, the Soc Dems popularity declined when it came to the actual vote, while the more traditional, even conservative Labour equalled it on the day.

Behind these fluctuating figures is a nervous electorate



AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

that wants change but is unsure whether they can trust the new left of SF and allies to actually govern, never mind deliver houses by the tens of thousands. The disparate and disunited nature of the opposition parties' election campaigns would have underlined this choke effect last November and helped to persuade many anti-government supporters that there was little prospect of an alternative government.

Much has changed since then – and quickly. The first few months of this Government has provided examples of a tired, moribund Government with the same entitled attitude to strokes and power play. Add in not only the worsening housing statistics but the, em, 'over-optimistic' government stats used in the election and housing minister James Browne's fumbling performance and this Government has an early political crisis.

More importantly, the potential for a renewed and reinvigorated opposition was triggered by the Government-created furore over Michael Lowry's novel form of corporatism, whereby his team can be in Government and opposition at the same time.

Most ironically, it was the *Irish Times* that first began to push the idea of a limited – very limited – form of left unity, as far back as January 2023, when it urged Bacik to forge unity with the Soc Dems to recreate a left-of-centre party that could revive Labour in another form. This idea reflected not a deep concern for Irish social democracy but a desire by the right-of-centre FFG to stimulate creation of an alternative opposition party to SF and/or a party that could be the third leg of a future FF/FG/soft-left coalition.

UNIFIED OPPOSITION

But when the Lowry/Government deal provoked an angry, unified opposition campaign, reaction from media and FFG parties was suddenly hostile. Interestingly, they targeted the party they regarded as the weak link in the united front of SF, Soc Dems, Labour and the far left. Bacik was taunted in the Dáil for allegedly tailing Mary Lou McDonald in the new opposition. This was not simply an attack on Ivana but a red flag waved at those old soldiers in Labour who are greatly unimpressed with such imagery.

Since then, opportunities for unity have come along, with suggestions for a broad left presidential effort as well as a campaign against the abolition of the triple lock and in defence of neutrality as well as housing.

The two names so far floated for a bid for the Áras have been singer, addiction counsellor and senator Frances Black and TD Catherine Connolly. Black would be regarded by Labour and Bacik as not quite Mary Lou but not exactly Mary Robinson either when it comes to the national question, while long time socialist Connolly left Labour in despair many years ago. Both would be seen as left-wing, republican fellow travellers by those Labourites who don't mind being reminded of the influence that Conor Cruise O'Brien, the party's northern spokesperson long ago,

wielded in government.

This drawing back from Black or Connolly explains why Labour and Bacik made a somewhat desperate suggestion recently that former World Health Organization deputy director general Dr Mike Ryan would be a good candidate for the presidency.

On the neutrality front, a multiplicity of groups on the left are organising a national demonstration next month and are holding meetings nationwide. Labour representatives were absent from the planning meetings and also from a recent rally in Dublin, but discreet messages from Bacik and Labour have expressed the intention to become involved "soon".

A recently announced united left housing campaign, Raise the Roof, has involved Labour, something the party could hardly boycott.

In recent years Bacik has expressed more than once her personal objection to sharing power with SF in any future government. She is seen as the ultimate western social democrat by many republicans.

It was noticeable that, while most parties eventually came to the aid of Sabina Higgins after she came under attack for her 'provocative...

outrageous... capitulation to Putin' in her appeal for peace talks in Ukraine in 2022, Bacik was way behind the posse on this issue (see *The Phoenix* 12/8/22).

Ivana often references her grandfather, Charles Bacik, who along with his family made a "huge contribution to our society" after arriving here in 1945. Charles owned four glass factories in Czechoslovakia but the communists seized or nationalised them (as social democrats sometimes do also) after World War II. Mr Bacik then emigrated to Ireland, where he co-founded Waterford Crystal.

Bacik and her party's lethargy in joining the rest of the left in united-front work is not just down to their traditional antipathy to the national question. The reality is that the virtual destruction of its working-class base has meant that Labour's vote is now overwhelmingly ABC (Ivana's own Dublin Bay South base is a good example of this).

Bacik's fundamental dilemma is that this cohort of essentially middle-class voters would shrink from unity with Provos and Trotskyists, whatever about the Soc Dems. Many, if not most, of these would prefer Labour to coalesce with FG or FF.

Alternatively, Ivana knows that a refusal to at least look like she wants to be part of a new, left-wing wave would alienate young radicals and others that want to take on the right-wing united front of establishment parties and individuals.

Many Labour TDs – such as Ged Nash, Duncan Smith and especially Marie Sherlock – are eager to revert to working-class politics but so far there has been little movement here.

Up until these unifying events, Bacik had hidden behind calls for unity with the Soc Dems and the Greens alone. Cleverly, Soc Dems acting leader Cian O'Callaghan called a meeting to discuss a joint presidential candidate, inviting these parties as well as SF and the far left.

Your move, Ivana.



Mary Lou McDonald



THREAT, NOT PROMISE

SLIGO DISTRICT Court heard the case of a man accused of verbally abusing gardaí on two occasions. On January 17 officers received reports of an intoxicated and argumentative individual at the Clayton Hotel in Sligo. They arrived to find Declan Cunnane (48) being asked by staff to leave the hotel. Cunnane, of Woodfield, Ballymote, Sligo, told the gardaí to "fuck off" on a number of occasions and, while being escorted out, said: "You think you're a big man. I'll sort you out." He added that was "a threat, not a promise". The defendant was then pepper-sprayed and handcuffed after attempting to grab one of the officers. Separately, on May 1, Cunnane was found "shouting loudly" in Sligo Courthouse. When asked by Garda McNulty to keep quiet, he replied: "Fuck off, you prick. Fuck you." Judge Michael Connellan convicted Cunnane on one public order charge, taking the other into account. *Sligo Weekender*

FORGOTTEN DRUGS

A MAN who failed a breathalyser test and was found in possession of a bag of drugs on two separate occasions appeared before Portlaoise District Court. On March 31, 2024, Glen Brereton of 9 The Meadow, Ballybrittas, was waved down at a Garda checkpoint. Officers noted the car skidding to a stop and that the driver smelled strongly of alcohol. Asked to provide a breath sample, Brereton told the gardaí: "I am fucked now." When asked about a bag of blue powder in his possession, he said it was "MDMA from three weeks ago when I was in Amsterdam. I forgot about it." On July 20, 2024, the defendant was once more pulled over and found in possession of a bag of cannabis and he again told gardaí: "I am fucked now." Brereton was disqualified from driving for three years, fined €300 for drink-driving and ordered to make a €500 donation for the charges relating to drug possession. *Leinster Express*

NOT-SO-GREAT ESCAPE

TWO MEN who became embroiled in a physical altercation with gardaí following a drunken incident on January 19 appeared before Letterkenny District Court. Officers observed John Morrow, of Silverwood, Balleybofey, in a "highly intoxicated" and aggressive state on Main Street, Letterkenny. He refused to leave the area, telling the gardaí to "fuck off". As they moved to arrest him, Morrow became physically aggressive. When he was restrained and placed in the back of a patrol van, his friend, Jamie Dowd, of Mark House, Stranorlar, tried to open the van doors to free his friend. Dowd also became aggressive with the officers, leading to his arrest as well. Solicitor for Dowd, Frank Dorrian, told the court that his client was "delivering a protest about the other gentleman being arrested". Judge Éiteáin Cunningham said she would apply the Probation Act if each man donated €300 to Donegal Hospice. *Donegal Democrat*

• Suitable contributions to: *The Phoenix*, 44 Lower Baggot St, D2, or email bogcuttings@thephoenix.ie