



Leo Varadkar

FORMER TAOISEACH Leo Varadkar's metamorphosis from Tory boy to wet centrist, from Blueshirt to Irish republican, and from anti-abortionist to virtually a woman's right to choose position, along with many other U-turns, is quite the political journey. The most significant part of this is his line on the national question, specifically his advocacy for a border poll, if only because it is mirrored by the reverse odyssey of current Taoiseach and leader of Fianna Fáil ('The Republican Party') Micheál Martin. This led to a public confrontation recently, something that is likely to be repeated even though the ever-so-responsible media seems determined to avoid the most spectacular role reversal of two taoisigh and the two historic big parties in the Republic.

Young Vlad the Impaler was the archetypal, right-wing student prince at Trainers, where he and Lucinda Creighton were leading lights in Young Fine Gael and ate socialists, Shinnars and those awful oiks in Ógra Fianna Fáil before dinner. It was, however, after he had fought his way into the Dáil in 2007 and became a lurking menace to Enda Kenny's leadership – along with others such as Brian Hayes and Paschal Donohoe – that he really asserted himself. But although he certainly was part of the cabal that was crushed by Field Marshall Phil Hogan in that famous party heave in 2010, during the general election the following year Vlad really made his mark.

The one lesson that Kenny and Hogan took from the upstart rebels was the view that, bad and all as the FF government looked during the crash and the troika's rule, simply waiting for their turn to enter government was only inviting the Labour Party to take advantage. Thus Vlad was forgiven for his disloyalty and was let loose to savage Labour and frighten its middle-class base by focusing on Labour's tax policies, a strategy that pushed the latter back from a threatening position early on in the election campaign.

At this point, Varadkar still cut an image as a menacing reactionary with views on 'lazy' workers and the unemployed that were best manifest by his campaign in 2017 – as social

protection minister – against welfare fraud with the slogan "welfare cheats". This was a crude tactic that most recognised was part of his party leadership campaign.

In the same period and for the same reason, he said that he stood for those who got up early in the morning (unlike, one supposes, those who lie in bed much of the day). He won the leadership that year (2017) and entered a period that eventually softened his political cough.

Varadkar's political values remained largely intact until he took the FG leadership but, one by one, in subsequent years he flipped positions on a number of basic political issues. As a young

Blueshirt in college he had resorted to that old trope

about Palestinian supporters being antisemitic and as a TD he attended the Oireachtas Friends of Israel group, which was chaired by Alan Shatter. Years later, however, and just one week after the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel, he condemned Israel's blockade of Gaza as collective punishment.

One of Varadkar's first initiatives as

taoiseach was to flag a referendum on abortion, something he had previously condemned as wrong even in the case of rape victims. He never quite came around to supporting an unqualified woman's right to choose but came close during the referendum, which passed easily with 66% in 2018.

Even on the issue of same-sex marriage he had initially demurred, stating that, while he did not believe homosexuality was wrong, he did not support same-sex marriage. Following his public declaration that he was gay, he went on to fully support the referendum on the issue.

In 2010 Vlad supported a scheme whereby immigrants would be paid to return to their own country but years later he condemned as "disgusting" British home secretary Priti Patel's proposal to send immigrants to Rwanda.

UNITED IRELAND

Recently, following the general election and his earlier retirement, the new Varadkar in a *Sunday Times* article expressed disappointment that bedrock issues such as the living wage and more sick days – stuff that would have been anathema to Vlad the Younger – are not being explicitly included in the coalition's Programme for Government in January. But he welcomed commitments in the programme to women's equality, LGBTQI+ and racism. All of this is a million miles away from slagging off the unemployed and low-paid workers, as in the old days.

However, the biggest single part of that article was concerned with the north and, while noting the extra €1bn for Martin's pet project, the shared island unit, he was critical of the failure to include any commitment to Irish unity. "It's likely that the impetus to work towards and plan for unification will have to come from outside Leinster House," he warned.

This is where Varadkar's real focus is now concentrated and he appears determined to take on Martin's ultra-revisionist new party policy on the north – a development that has been not so much ignored as virtually covered up by Dublin's political correspondents.

Considering that the core of FF's foundation, identity and success as the biggest party in the state for nearly a century has been its commitment to constitutional republicanism and a united Ireland, Martin's conversion to *Sunday Independent*-type partitionism is remarkable. It began in 2011 shortly after he became leader of a party that was on the floor – never a good time to throw out basic principles in a blind panic. But just as FG's Phil Hogan had successfully



AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

appealed to middle-class FF voters to 'loan' their votes to FG, Martin began to appeal for reconciliation with the same vote and concluded that the faintest whiff of nationalism would be counter-productive.

But if it began in Martin's head as a strategic electoral ploy, it soon gripped his political faculties and, with attentive midwife Eoghan Harris in attendance, a terrible and most unbeautiful creature, the ardent southern partitionist, was born. This also involved FF's abandonment of the SDLP, for long a party that moderate southern nationalists looked to. For years FF competed with FG for the role of the SDLP's southern partner under the leadership of John Hume, the representative of northern, constitutional nationalism.

From 2007 the FF leadership – first Bertie Ahern, then Brian Cowen – talked a lot about unity and even a merger with the SDLP. In 2011, Martin said the party was preparing a white paper on a united Ireland. Nothing happened for five years. In 2016 he said FF would take a year to work out the "practicalities of a united Ireland". In 2017 Martin promised a 12-point plan for a united Ireland within months. Then the party said the plan would be published later that year. Nothing happened. In February 2018 an FF statement declared that "discussions now about a united Ireland are premature".

Similarly, Martin's 2016 declaration that FF would stand in local elections in the north in 2017 – via a merger with the SDLP or unilaterally – was binned. In 2022, then SDLP leader Colum Eastwood, demoralised by Martin's capricious behaviour, declared the partnership with FF to be at an end.

Vlad recognised that Martin was trying to retrieve FF's middle-class vote and he resolved to outflank FF in reverse by appealing to its nationalist base. In 2019 he set up FG's Northern Ireland Engagement Group to forge links with northern politicians (in reality, the SDLP). On resuming the role of taoiseach in 2022, Varadkar delegated two Dublin FG politicians – then junior minister Neale Richmond and Dún Laoghaire councillor Lorraine Hall – to move into the debate about a border poll. Their brief from Vlad was that, unlike the FF leadership, they were to support such a poll and engage with Ireland's Future, the main lobby group behind the campaign for a poll. Thus, the strange spectacle of FF and FG virtually swapping roles on the national question.

REJUVENATED

In 2023 Vlad revived the old title of Fine Gael, the United Ireland Party, in the introduction to the party's northern policy. When it came to the section on the future of our shared island, it said: "Bunreacht na hÉireann affirms our national aspiration for territorial unity. Fine Gael, the United Ireland Party, shares that aspiration."

Martin has explicitly and repeatedly stated that his "shared island" policy does not include a border poll or other moves towards a united Ireland. He recently ruled it out this side of 50 years.

Much of the impetus behind Vlad's initiative seems to have dissipated following his flight from office last year but he himself appears to have been rejuvenated by the move. He has spoken of the need to not simply push for a border poll but that adequate preparations be made to ensure its passage and he uses whatever platform he can find to push his message.

Despite not standing in the general election, he sought pledges from political parties to treat Irish unity as an objective, not an aspiration, and that they would back the establishment of a new Ireland forum to plan for it. Questions from Goldhawk to FF about whether the party would say yes to Varadkar's proposal were not answered at the time.

POLITICAL POLEMIC

Perhaps Varadkar's most effective move to date was to puncture Martin's mantra that no moves towards a united Ireland can be made before there is reconciliation in the north, a stipulation that he claimed (wrongly)



Micheál Martin

was at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). This condition is actually a warmed-up version of the unionist veto but Vlad's forensic talent with political polemic came out when he filleted Martin's argument as follows: "[The GFA] does not require that reconciliation between the two main communities should occur before a border poll takes place and I am sure there would not have been a Good Friday Agreement had this pre-condition been set. I think making it a pre-condition would be a mistake. It could encourage some to eschew reconciliation so that they do

not have to contemplate unification. However, I firmly believe that reconciliation, unity among people, is deeply desirable and is the ultimate prize."

The unanswered question about Varadkar is what was it that transmogrified this arch Blueshirt into a constitutional republican? His resignation statement referred to personal and political factors and, while the former impulse has been cited by many, it seems that his recent activity means it was the type of politics he was engaged in, not politics *per se*, that provoked his resignation.

Another factor is the ex-taoiseach's personal and political background. Little noticed at the time were the references in two biographies of Varadkar to two of his uncles jailed by the British during the Indian movement for independence. Varadkar's family are immensely proud of their relatives' record, which was rewarded with government decorations after independence, and also with the role of Vlad's aunt, Prabha, in the movement.

The mutual solidarity and respect between the Irish and Indian movements for independence is an enduring relationship developed throughout the 20th century. Coming from the outside Varadkar would perhaps, ironically, have little of the anti-republican sentiments prevalent in some quarters of FG.

Did his personal and political emotions merge in the lead up to his resignation from high office 16 months ago?



HAVEN'T GONE AWAY?

DUNDALK DISTRICT Court head the case of a man who stuck his middle fingers up at gardai on mobile patrol, leading to his arrest. Daniel Madejski (31) of Park Street, Dundalk, was observed by the officers in an intoxicated state at Francis Street, Dundalk, on June 29 after they received complaints about a man acting erratically. The defendant was shouting obscenities and claiming that he was a member of the IRA. When Madejski spotted the approaching gardai, he stuck up both middle fingers at them and continued yelling obscenities. He was arrested and charged with public intoxication and engaging in threatening, abusive or insulting behaviour. The solicitor for the defence told the court that Madejski – who has eight previous convictions, including three for public order infringements – would like to apologise for his behaviour and that he had too much to drink while celebrating his birthday. He was ordered to complete 60 hours of community service. *Dundalk Democrat*

HIDE AND SEEK

AN INTOXICATED man who tried to hide from gardai behind a bus, having reacted aggressively after being prevented from boarding by the driver, appeared before Sligo District Court. Sergeant Derek Butler told the court that on October 16, 2024, officers received reports of an intoxicated man being abusive to staff and passengers at Sligo Bus Station. When they arrived, they saw Jamie Grenaghan (33) of Boley Hill, Manorhamilton, Leitrim, attempting to hide from them by walking behind a bus. When gardai asked Grenaghan for his details, he said he wouldn't provide them, before telling the officers to "fuck off". They asked Grenaghan to accompany them to Sligo Garda Station, to which he replied: "Fuck you, I won't." Defence solicitor Laura Spellman said Grenaghan would like to apologise to the gardai and that he hasn't touched alcohol since the incident. Judge Sandra Murphy adjourned the case to await a GP letter proving the defendant's sobriety. *Sligo Weekender*

'ORANGE BASTARDS'

RYAN JOHNSTON (35) of Fern Park, Derry, received a three-month suspended sentence at Derry Magistrates' Court after being charged with disorderly behaviour in Altnagelvin Hospital. Police were visiting the defendant's address to deal with a breach of curfew when they became concerned that he was intoxicated to a dangerous extent. Having decided to take him to the hospital, Johnston passed out in the police car and, when he awoke at the hospital, became highly abusive towards officers and staff. He repeatedly called officers "Orange bastards" and swore repeatedly at staff. When questioned, Johnston claimed to have no memory of committing the offences, admitting his recollection of the night was hazy. Judge Ted Magill handed Johnston a three-month suspended sentence. *Derry Post*

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