

**Alliances for Democracy – against Austerity in Europe.**

This year marks the centenary of the Easter Rising against British rule in Ireland.

The events of Easter week 1916 were a catalyst for a new, sustained phase of political struggle for Irish independence and national democracy throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

That has lasted until the present day.

The political vision of the 1916 Rising found expression in the Easter Proclamation.

It was a remarkable and revolutionary document which envisioned the transformation of Irish society.

It called for national sovereignty, democracy, equality and social justice, and asserted that all children of the nation should be cherished equally.

Significantly it acknowledged our gallant allies in Europe in recognition of the wider international context within which the Rising took place and from which Irish republicanism has drawn its historic origins and inspiration.

The Easter Rising, soon followed by the Russian and German Revolutions sat in stark contrast with the unfolding world conflict between rival imperialist powers of that era.

The political conflict and insurrections of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century dramatically forced onto the international stage the historic contest between the ideas of capital and labour, and how society should be organised.

These profound questions have continued to reverberate throughout the last 120 years.

James Connolly the Irish revolutionary leader famously said:

“The cause of labour is the cause of Ireland, the cause of Ireland is the cause of labour; they cannot be dissevered.”

He correctly identified the connection between the struggles for national liberation, and social change.

That central tenet was firmly established within the Easter Proclamation.

Its timeless values are the ideological framework which today guides Sinn Féin in our ambition to transform Irish society.

Shortly after the Easter Rising a war for national independence began in Ireland but it was then eclipsed by a counter revolution and the partition of Ireland.

That led to the emergence of two conservative states north and south, and a significant British colonial presence.

Today Sinn Féin's long-term strategic project is to build an Ireland of Equals where all citizens are treated with equality, dignity and fairness.

Present day Ireland is much different from 100 years ago.

In recent years the Irish Peace Process has also had a transformational effect.

However, not since the time of the counter-revolution in 1922-23 has Irish society been more sharply polarised between wealth and inequality, individualism and solidarity, and the political ideas of the right and the left.

A battle of ideas is underway about what type of society Ireland should become.

The most immediate cause of this realignment and political and social upheaval stems from the geo political and economic consequences of the international financial crisis of 2007-2008.

In global terms inequality has soared.

It is a scandal that 1% of the world's population should own more than 50% of global net wealth.

The world is also becoming an increasingly more unstable and dangerous place.

The refugee crisis exemplifies these realities.

This international crisis is not some aberration.

It is directly attributable to narrow, vindictive and self-serving political, economic, and diplomatic decisions taken mainly by Western power blocs, and their legacy of imperialist and colonial interests.

Now austerity has been adopted by international financial capital and its political allies on the conservative right as a new 'shock doctrine', to re-establish stability according to its strategic world view.

The economic and political elites who support the austerity agenda say it is the only way to stabilise the international financial system, and reduce the deficits which have bankrupted national economies.

But tell that to the people of Ireland, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Iceland and elsewhere.

Austerity is not about economic recovery.

It is entirely about ideology, political control and creating a conservative hegemony.

That is why it is synonymous with political authoritarianism, expanded deregulation, and rolling back the state.

It is an inherently anti-democratic agenda.

These are the reasons why it has become a pervasive influence within the EU.

And that explains why the EU played such a vindictive and punitive role against the Greek government.

The Troika and powerful elements in the EU decided to punish and undermine the Greek government because it had the audacity to reject the demands of international bankers and conservative establishment, and instead put the democratic sovereignty of the Greek people first.

The Greek experience demands that serious parties of the left and all progressives engage with the EU as a key site of struggle in order to assert the primacy of Social Europe, democracy and solidarity.

A resurgence of narrow nationalist, conservative and right wing forces is occurring across Europe.

That has been mirrored by a collapse in centrist social democracy.

But the political realignment in Europe is not all in one direction.

New left, popular and progressive political projects have emerged and are growing in political significance.

A fight back against austerity has begun.

New political ideas about the future and how to reorganise the political economy of Europe and in our countries are growing in popularity.

The evidence exists in:

- The European parliament election results of 2014
- The re-election of SYRIZA against massive opposition
- The surge in electoral support for anti-austerity parties in Portugal, Scotland and Spain
- And the leadership and membership changes within the British Labour Party.

February's general election results in the south of Ireland provided more evidence.

Sinn Féin contested that election on an anti-austerity, fair recovery programme, and support for national independence and reconciliation.

We are now the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest party in the Irish parliament.

This May we will contest the regional Assembly elections in the north of Ireland, where we currently sit in a coalition government set up under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement.

We will fight that contest on the same election manifesto.

We will continue to use our political strength in the north to oppose the undemocratic imposition of the British conservative government's austerity agenda in that state.

Sinn Féin's national strategy is geared towards becoming a party of government north and south, by gradually building popular support and political strength.

But the institution of government is not an end in itself.

Government should not be confused with political power.

You can be in government and not have power.

Political strength is essential to control the political power which ensures that the institution of government works as a means to make transformational change.

That is an essential strategic condition. It will determine the circumstances under which our Party will go into government in the south of Ireland.

Parties of the Left must be serious about delivering change. They must be clear sighted and realistic.

One of our leaders used to say;

“Revolutionaries have to be pragmatic; wish lists are for Christmas.”

The challenge facing the Left in Europe is to become stronger and more cohesive.

Strategy and political strength are key to that.

There is no one size fits all template.

These factors need to be developed within our respective national contexts.

The universal values of democracy, equality, social justice, and community solidarity represent a shared vision for a better Europe and the world.

That vision and narrative of transformation must also be practical and deliverable.

In the Irish language we say; “Ní neart go cur le chéile.”

That means, in unity there is strength.

The vision of an Ireland of Equals is indivisible from a Greece or Portugal of Equals.

These cannot be separated from the goal of a Europe of Equals.

The austerity agenda has to be countered with alternative and workable policies on:

- Economic development and job creation
- Tax justice
- Enterprise and growth
- Sustainable public services
- Climate change, and,
- Human rights.

Strategically that requires the building of democratic alliances across all strands of progressive political and civic opinion within our own countries, on a transnational basis, and within the European parliament.

Our collective focus must be upon making change, not simply talking about change; or worse, the folly of utopian wish lists.

We need to be people in a hurry;

Hungry to make, and deliver change:

The world cannot wait!

The Left in Europe both in opposition and government must act as an engine of change.

The political Left in government needs to consolidate with increased cooperation, by working together, and with greater solidarity to reduce isolation.

We need to demonstrate that our policies for fair recovery are not wishful thinking, but also achievable.

Bilateral and multilateral links should be explored and developed on trade; the knowledge economy, innovation and training; mutual investment opportunities; tourism; and more.

The political strength of Left and anti-austerity parties in government should be used to maximise mutual economic cooperation and the promotion of progressive, democratic programmes which will benefit all our people.

The Easter Rising was a spark which lit a fire of popular resistance against British rule in Ireland.

Camille Desmoulins, the French revolutionary, said nearly 250 years ago;

“The great only appear great because we are on our knees; let us rise.”

So there is a need for a democratic People’s Rising in Ireland, across Europe, and the globe against austerity, poverty and injustice.

That is a democratic People’s Rising for a better world.

This historic responsibility falls to us, as democrats and progressives.

We are the people we have been waiting for:

Let us join together and build that Rising.