

# The spectacular fall from grace of Ireland's Fianna Fail should serve as a warning to the UK and other governments across Europe who are treating the financial crisis with ill-tasting austerity measures.

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/03/09/fianna-fail-ireland-lessons-for-the-uk/?pfstyle=w p>

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*The ejection of one of Europe's most successful political parties from power is a vivid illustration that voting publics can and will react badly to extreme austerity measures. [Danielle Moran](#) finds that while the UK's economic situation may not be quite so severe as Ireland's, if the coalition government plans to continue with its current programme of harsh austerity measures, it should take heed of the fate of Fianna Fail and be wary of a resurgent Labour party.*

Irish elections have always been a local affair. The use of the seemingly complex Proportional Representation- Single Transferable Vote (PR-STV) electoral system coupled with a regular shift in power from one centre-right leaning government to another has meant that Irish elections have, in the past, failed to capture the imagination and interest of the country's European neighbours.



Gilmore and Kenny's victory could be a harsh lesson for governments that do not heed popular discontent with austerity measures.

However, the nation that attracted global interest during its elongated days of economic boom and its melding of thorough economic collapse with EU-IMF financial assistance has been watched closely by the political leaders who not only hold the purse strings of the EU but also by those who are fearful for their grasp on political power.

For European political leaders, Ireland's Fianna Fail and Green Party governing

partnership represented the first political victims of the 2008 global economic crash. The former government had succeeded in bailing out the Irish banking sector and negotiating an EU-International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout of the country's account but was denied a similar reprieve by the Irish electorate as voters decapitated both parties at the ballot box on Friday, 25 February 2011.

The election was watched nervously by David Cameron and political leaders across Europe, as this was the first election triggered by policies that encouraged and subsequently attempted to placate the financial crash. The right-of-centre Fianna Fail and their junior coalition partners, the Green Party, were forced into calling an early general election with over 12 months of their term left to run. A toxic combination of austerity policies, the imposition of the EU-International Monetary Fund bailout and an unprecedented crash in popularity rates had forced the Greens to play their 'nuclear option' and [walk out of Dáil Éireann](#) early this year.

The [incoming government](#), announced last week, is a coalition of the right-of-centre, Fine Gael, and the main left party, Labour and has been likened by many British commentators to the Conservative/Liberal Democrat partnership in Westminster. Both parties received their highest vote shares ever and their election will be deemed an unprecedented success as Fianna Fail is relegated to the third largest party for the first time in Irish history. Those on both the right and left of

the Irish political spectrum will no doubt claim 2011 as the election in which the Irish people embraced their parties' policies.

However, that is a somewhat misleading and superficial view. Unfortunately for the Fine Gael and Labour TDs, this election is not the story of the Irish people's embracing of a new politics, but rather it is an [utter rejection of Fianna Fail](#), the party that, throughout the past century, has been the most potent political force in Europe.

Sitting on government benches for every three out of four years, Fianna Fáil has enjoyed near unstoppable electoral success since the advent of Irish independence. The party has been in power for approximately 90 per cent of the last 25 years and has regularly pulled in 40 per cent of votes in every general election. Now, for the first time in the party's history, Fianna Fáil has been rejected across the country and, embarrassingly, has been left with just one out of 47 seats in the capital.

Fianna Fáil and the Green Party treated Ireland's spectacular financial crash with a number of austerity measures, beginning in 2008 with what was termed '[the toughest budget in many years](#)'. Proposals to withdraw medical cards for those over 70 years of age and to reinstate university fees in the 2009 budget plans were met with a passionate public outcry and both pensioners and students alike took to the capital's streets to protest.

Two years later and budget cutbacks have claimed child benefit and social welfare payments as victims. Cuts have forced the closure of army barracks and ensured the passage of a controversial decision to dispose of a cervical cancer vaccination programme aimed at young women. TDs began to defect from Fianna Fáil's cost-cutting agenda in 2008 and the *Irish Times* rightly stressed its '[serious doubt](#)' over the capacity of the Government to serve its full term.

Perhaps it is now time for UK chancellor George Osborne to consider his advice doled out to readers of *The Times* in 2006. In Dublin 'to listen and learn', Osborne wrote that, '[Ireland stands as a shining example of the art of the possible in long-term economic policymaking](#)'. Although widely derided for his comments since, Osborne cannot be faulted for praising the developed skills of the workforce, or the state's encouragement of enterprise and innovation.

However, the UK government should pay heed to the extensive austerity measures undertaken across the Irish Sea and the ever-falling popularity rates of the last Irish coalition that ran in parallel. The UK's financial footing may not be as precarious as its smaller neighbour's, yet the risk to the Conservatives' and Liberal Democrats' political survival most certainly is. Fianna Fáil and the Green Party stepped on uneasy ground when their cuts targeted programmes that the population felt passionate about, but even they did not face down the public anger that has risen in the UK over policies that moved to [sell-off the forests](#) and woodland or shut down local [libraries](#).

The Liberal Democrats, in particular, would do well to study the Irish Green Party's fall from grace – all six Green members of the former government have lost their seats. Instead, the government benches will now be filled with Labour TDs, who saw their party's popularity jump to [percentages in the thirties](#) only to rapidly fall back to 19.4 per cent in the election, and Fine Gael TDs who watched over a no confidence motion and [knife-edge leadership battle](#) for their party last summer. Having overwhelmingly rejected a joint programme for government put to the electorate by Fine Gael and Labour in 2007, the public awarded the right-of-centre party a mere 36.1 per cent of the vote in 2011 while neither relatively weak opposition party won a large share of the lost Fianna Fail vote.

This Irish election, then, can be considered less as a success for either Fine Gael and Labour, but rather as a thorough rejection of Fianna Fáil and their coalition partners, whom many believe brought the Irish people boom and bust and [squandered their hard-won sovereignty](#).

The UK's Conservatives and Liberal Democrats would do well to take their Chancellors' advice and be wary of attempting to '[shut out the future](#)'. If Europe's most successful political party can fail in the face of a relatively weak opposition before government has run its full term, it stands to reason that the Conservatives, who gained only 36.1 per cent of the vote in the 2010 general election, and their

junior Coalition partners, who gathered only 23 per cent, stand in the same perilous position. They may also face the additional challenge of a stronger opposition in Labour.

Ireland has shown us that years of austerity measures that beget more of the same without reprieve can spawn an angry, disillusioned electorate. Osborne would be wise to look to Ireland, and find a [Plan B](#) for economic recovery. If not, his electorate may quickly shun the Coalition, even if there is little else on offer.