

The ‘Playing a Blinder’ myth and why we must not forget shortcomings in unprecedented times

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Opportunity amongst the panic

After the 2008 crash, successive governments led by Fianna Fail and Fine Gael introduced austerity measures¹ that set the backdrop for the 2020 election. Many people had become frustrated at the provision of public services and began to question its proficiency within the context of a rise in the cost of living (Carroll, 2020b; Leahy, 2020). A predicted two-horse race (between Fianna Fail and Fine Gael) at the latter stages of 2019 and the initial exclusion of Sinn Fein’s Mary-Lou McDonald from the leaders debate added to the monumental outcome whereby Sinn Fein had ‘won the popular vote’ (Carroll 2020a; Kelly, 2019; Ryan and McQuinn, 2020). Given the seeming repudiation of Fine Gael policies and leadership, it seemed as though Varadkar was effectively finished. Ireland had essentially ‘voted for change’ – or at least shown its intent (Leahy, 2020) – but the desire for alternative government evaporated once the coronavirus had breached the barriers. Having addressed the country, shortly after the initial lockdown, the interim and previously relatively unpopular² Taoiseach was, in the moment, reconstructed as capable, competent and empathetic regarding the understandable fear caused by the news of the pandemic (Doyle, 2020).

The responses of parodied political figures such as Boris Johnson³ and Donald Trump⁴ perhaps further enhanced Varadkar’s global and local image after he

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delivered a swift announcement of a lockdown and its conditions (Burne, 2020; Stewart, 2020). Globally, Varadkar's swift action and utilising of his medical experience constructed an image⁵ of a leader who was figuratively fighting the virus whilst neighbouring leader, Boris Johnson, was indecisive when attempting to impose guidelines (Landler, 2020). At home, Varadkar's attempts at easing the economic hardship of citizens during a global pandemic, along with his re-joining of the medical register (Hurley, 2020), earned him a level of admiration amongst Ireland's citizens with 82% of a 1016-person sample indicating that the government are managing this crisis well (Regan, 2020).

While it is likely that those in Government, who have overseen this global emergency will find themselves in power once this has subsided, Ireland could, nevertheless, benefit by adopting a more critical view of current political arrangements against the backdrop of the coronavirus. Therefore, the discussion presented through recent newspaper articles and social media posts suggests three broad options for analysis: (a) Varadkar's quick action in a complex situation is one of competency, (b) Varadkar's performance is opportunistic or (c) a combination of both competency and opportunism. The purpose here is to suggest that option (b) is the more accurate within the context of a discussion based on welfare, housing and healthcare.

The 'strong leadership' mask is slipping

Welfare

The past influences the present, and this is evident in the cracks appearing in the 'energetic leadership' of Varadkar (Landler, 2020, para 4). The quick governance and provisions for 'ordinary' people have already been met with disgruntlement that mirrors previous campaigns run by the Taoiseach. Referring to the bi-weekly payment of €350, Varadkar⁶ criticised those working for '€11 an hour' for '20 hours per week' for asking their employers to 'lay them off' so that they could benefit financially from the coronavirus (Finn, 2020; Landler, 2020; Mullally, 2020). Varadkar began his assessment by stating, 'I have heard stories...', a poor substitute for evidence of this claim (Finn, 2020; Landler, 2020; Mullally 2020), and took a similar line to Varadkar's 'Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All' campaign, that was condemned for exaggerating the amount of welfare fraud that occurs in Ireland (RTÉ, 2017), showing a willingness to reiterate standard neoliberal tropes critical of welfare claimants, and an assumption that 'such people' will inevitably abuse the system.

Housing

Previously, Varadkar received criticism for not empathising with those who were not born with 'middle class privilege' (Mullally, 2018). Varadkar's approach to the lower classes was regarded as 'tone deaf' and suggested he lacked a sense of empathy (Mullally, 2018). In discussing approaches to raising the funds for a house deposit, Varadkar declared: '...people go abroad for a period and earn money.

Others get money from their parents. Lots of us did' (Mullally, 2018, para 2). These comments regarding housing/home-ownership appeared insensitive and reflect Varadkar's and Fine Gael's approach to housing concerns during this pandemic. Fine Gael's current plan to build 112,000 social houses by 2027 (Fine Gael, 2020) is vague on long-term security and aligns itself with the party's pre-virus intention to restrict the rights of low-income tenants to buy their home, therefore signifying an inability to address the need for stable tenancies (Kelly, 2020; Lyons, 2020). During this pandemic, useful legislation was introduced to reduce stress for home-owners/legitimate renters fearing falling behind on payments through the introduction of payment breaks, suspension of evictions, and rent freezes (O'Neill, 2020). However, housing charity *Threshold* have been inundated with calls from 'rent-a-roomers' who fear eviction in these uncertain times (Towey, 2020), and with Eoin Ó Broin, Sinn Féin's housing spokesperson, recently condemning Fine Gael's carelessness after they publicly released their '7 policy tests & 10 specific policies',⁷ without mentioning housing/homelessness, it appears we are seeing the continuation of a trend that dismisses the struggles of vulnerable people.

Healthcare

In 2016, Varadkar deemed an increase in beds to be an inefficient fix for hospitals experiencing a rise in 'trolley figures'⁸ as it would negatively impact the productivity of hospital staff (Turner et al., 2020). Ireland's healthcare system has been widely critiqued due to insufficient staffing, overcrowding and having fewer than 5.2 intensive care beds per 100,000 of the population (Brennan, 2019; Meskill, 2020; Turner et al., 2020), but Varadkar's previous dismissiveness signals a perpetuation of this trend once the coronavirus has abated.

Varadkar combatted the predicted overwhelming of hospitals by introducing a one-tier health system and issuing a statement to medical émigrés and former professionals to return to the medical register (Clifford, 2020; Flaherty, 2020). The response to 'Be On Call for Ireland' has been successful (McGee, 2020) and has shown Varadkar's potential in addressing prevalent issues in healthcare. However, measures that aim to combat the deficiencies in the healthcare system are predicted to be temporary (Turner et al., 2020) with future action more likely to resemble Varadkar's business-style comments. With government debt rising, it is expected that the introduction of a one-tier health system (Ryan, 2020), and the deployment of healthcare staff will be secondary to the profitable private health sector that receives €2.5 billion per year in premiums and government support through subsidies and tax breaks for investors (Turner et al., 2020).

Concluding remarks

The theme of the most recent election was 'change' (Page, 2020). The Irish public had grown frustrated with an intractable housing market, a struggling healthcare system and stigmatised welfare policy,⁹ but the outbreak of coronavirus has

granted Varadkar a platform to address these matters rather opportunistically. Arguably, this is the nature of politics, but simply disregarding past actions and current slips would dismiss the importance of Ireland's call for change. 'Playing a blinder'¹⁰ (in comparison to Johnson's and Trump's incompetence) during an emergency situation, does not imply a sudden 'road to Damascus' moment for Varadkar, rather this brief window of apparent competence should be considered a short-term aberration, rather than a change in ideology and behaviour.

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Notes

1. A brief overview of austerity measures and cuts taken over the last decade: <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/economy/budget-2018-from-austerity-to-boom-ireland-s-last-ten-budgets-1.3249596>
2. Varadkar's approval ratings dropped from 51% in October 2019 to 35% in January 2020. In the same month, Fine Gael recorded its lowest approval rating (23%) since the previous general election: <https://www.echolive.ie/corknews/Latest-opinion-poll-bad-news-for-Government-86f725e7-adf9-49a0-ac2f-294f2e40b91d-ds>
3. Boris Johnson stubbornly insisted on continuing to shake hands with people before contracting COVID-19: <https://twitter.com/trtworld/status/1243840254542405633>
4. Donald Trump's competence has, yet again, been called into question after he suggested that injecting disinfectant could act as a cure for the coronavirus: <https://twitter.com/guardian/status/1253673829454483457>
5. American talk-show host, Jimmy Kimmel, praising Varadkar: <https://twitter.com/eoghannmcdermo/status/124787873101777152?lang=en>
6. Link to video for Varadkar's comments: <https://twitter.com/caulmick/status/1245795488466640899>
7. Eoin Ó Broin's comments: <https://twitter.com/EOBroin/status/1250062612638904323>
8. 'Trolley figures' in Irish public hospitals: https://www.inmo.ie/Trolley_Ward_Watch
9. The main issues for voting in 2020 election: <https://www.rte.ie/news/election-2020/2020/0209/1114111-election-exit-poll/>
10. A Twitter search for the phrase 'playing a blinder' leads to a timeline of contested public opinion if traced back to the first week of the coronavirus outbreak: https://twitter.com/search?q=%20playing%20a%20blinder%20&src=typed_query

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