

The Potential of Coalition
Insights from the Irish experience of governing and law
Wed 18 October 2023

Introduction

Thank you. It is an honor to be here and to have the opportunity to speak to you about the Irish experience of coalitions.

Before I begin, I would like to take the opportunity to recognize the significant and unique contribution Kader Asmal made back in my home of Ireland.

He is personal hero as a very visible leader of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Ireland during my formative years. He is fondly remembered by many as a law lecturer in Trinity College Dublin, founder of the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, and for his help to the Social Democratic and Labour Party of Northern Ireland in writing their constitution.

He made many friends and allies during his time in Ireland, and I'd like to take the opportunity to pay tribute to one them, my own friend and mentor Bride Rosney who died last month who in common cause with Kader was a champion for human rights and they worked together on many campaigns. She instilled in me, and many others a passion for public service, for justice and human rights.

Today I've been asked to speak on the topic of the potential of coalition government.

From reflecting on both the broad Irish experience as well as my own I would argue that while coalition government is not straightforward it has the potential to both offer stability in turbulent times, while implementing a programme of significant reform.

And so, over the next 30 minutes I would like to cover a number of themes relating to that experience;

1. First I'd like to briefly cover the History of Coalitions in Ireland – from the long norm of single party government in Ireland to coalitions more recently becoming the expected way of government
2. I'll then spend most of my time covering some of the formal and informal structures that have been built to support coalitions (from an agreeing policy programme for government, Annual reports on progress, the role of cabinet committees, the role of leaders and leaders' meetings as well as the role political and policy advisors)
3. Throughout my remarks I'll mention how coalition building is not just about Government formation – in Ireland it has become a way of policy making and law reform – that includes the growing role of parliamentary committees, pre-legislative scrutiny of proposed laws, the experience of how to ensure the introduction of major social changes through recent referenda, and coalition's role in social partnership and the Northern Ireland peace process).

4. And finally I'll try and draw some learning and conclusion including if there are winners and losers from the process. And from the Irish experience there certainly are.

Thought-out this evening I'll draw on my own *experience of forming and living inside a Coalition*

And also try share some thoughts on the key strategic, political and operational challenges and opportunities of coalition from the Irish experience

But as the title of this event here today mentions a lecture one of the first things, I'd like to say is that I certainly don't intend to lecture anybody.

We, in Ireland, after many years, are still learning what coalition government means and there is no way that we would ever suggest that the experience in one country is applicable in another. I will very much leave it up to you to draw conclusions that may be of relevance here in South Africa rather than suggest in any way that what has happened in Ireland is likely, or even desirable, as an outcome.

So to get started let me made a statement of the seemingly obvious. The business of politics, government and making laws is almost always a messy enterprise. That's the case when things are relatively straightforward but even more so in tougher times.

From the Irish experience, coalition government is complex, it's not straight forward, it's a learning experience for

everyone involved. It can also be a harsh experience for many politicians and political parties.

Coalition government means compromise, it means trust building, it means more political business is done in public and more policy making is done in formal and informal ways within an expanded government and parliamentary infrastructure.

Over the last 15 years, Ireland has navigated several significant political and economic crises. While there are still significant social and economic challenges in Ireland, nobody can argue with the significant turnaround in our economic fortunes. The focus of my comments today is that the Irish experience of coalition government has made a contribution to that turnaround by providing stability, leadership and effective policy making.

Those recent crises in Ireland, started in 2008 with the banking collapse and the related housing market crash and implosion of the Irish public finances. These related emergencies left the country with nowhere to turn except a bailout from the International Monetary Fund, the EU Commission and the European Central Bank (collectively known as the troika).

Irish unemployment more than trebled in the five years to mid-2012, peaking at 15.1%.” Youth unemployment was over 30%. In 2011 the first budget I was directly involved in contained tax increases, and spending CUTS of €3.6bn or 72 billion Rand^[1] and the government deficit was 10.1%.

Yet, Ireland today is a very different country economically to where it was just more than a decade ago. Currently we are experiencing full employment with a record number of

people at work and one of the few countries in the EU with a government surplus.

Historians, economists and political scientists will, I'm sure, argue over the exact reasons for the turnaround in Irish fortunes.

The size and open nature of our economy, our membership of the European Union, a significant commitment over decades to attracting and retaining multinational investment, the relative youth, education and productivity of the Irish population. The resilience of the Irish nature and the Irish culture of pulling together in times of adversity - Meithéal. And that is not to underestimate how difficult it was for many.

In my view, all these things are true, but I also believe what is now an Irish tradition of coalition government also played its part in helping the country navigate challenging times in recent years.

I'll take a little time now to give a short history of the Irish experience of coalition government

That's because coalition government has only relatively recently become the norm in the Republic of Ireland

We have just celebrated the centenary of the foundation of the Irish state in 1922 – and for most of those 100 years we have had what we called a two and a half party system.

What that meant in effect was between 1922 and 1989 was significant periods of time with majority, or single party government, (mostly of the largest party Fianna Fail) followed by brief periods of coalition government, mostly involving the second and third largest parties (Fine Gael and the half party, my party, Labour). We had coalition governments on five occasions across five decades in the 1940s 1950s 70s and 80s.

It is worth noting that none of these coalitions were re-elected during this time. Perhaps they were just giving Fianna Fail a rest until they recovered their energy sufficiently to win the subsequent election.

But that dynamic has changed since the 1980s and now coalition is the norm and every Irish government since 1989 has been a coalition.

Depending on how you count them that is at least 8 different governments with many original combinations of parties and political innovations. For example, the coalition government that was formed following the 2020 election has for the first time introduced the innovation of a rotating Prime Minister (as we say Taoiseach) where the role has swapped, mid-way

through the government's term, between the leaders of the two largest parties in the coalition.

So that's a bit of the history and I now want to move on to the many formal and informal ways in which the working of government and the making of laws in Ireland has had to evolve to adapt to coalition government.

Forming a government, deciding on legislative priorities, drafting and passing legislation is never easy and it is certainly more straightforward in a single party government.

I'll go into some of those points later but at this point it is worth noting that perhaps the most significant evolution over the last 30 years has been the political mindset in Ireland.

When in 1989, what was then Ireland's largest political party, Fianna Fail, entered into a coalition arrangement for the first time it was dismissed as a "temporary little arrangement" by one of their most senior cabinet Ministers, Albert Reynolds. Up to that point, it was a political strength for Fianna Fail, the largest party, that ONLY they could provide 'stable' single party government and in most elections the voters agreed.

Again, it's a very basic truth of politics that coalition is an unnatural state and most political parties do not want to be in a coalitional arrangement - especially those that are used to being in government on their own.

So, coalition was forced on Ireland's largest political party by the electorate. By 1989 they simply didn't have the votes to continue with single party government.

By 2002, the political culture had shifted.

In the election of that year the political slogan "*One-Party Government - No Thanks*" was a vote winner for the Progressive Democrats (a junior coalition partner at the time) who then re-entered government with Fianna Fail.

That theme – *No thanks to single party government* – has continued ever since. Now, any suggestion of a political party achieving an overall majority on its own is seen as both unlikely and a political liability.

Coalition government is not only the norm it is now the political preference of the Irish electorate. Every discussion on the formation of government in Ireland centers around coalition building and currently, perhaps the biggest impediment to Sinn Fein entering government is seen as finding potential coalition partners.

It is also important to note that coalition building is not merely the Irish norm but is also the European norm, with the UK being an obvious outlier in this regard.

Recent elections in both Spain and Poland bear witness to this. In the case of both, it is an important reminder that, when it comes to coalition building, it is not necessarily the largest party that forms the government. Rather it is the party that is most able to build an alliance. Effective alliances are based on trust and openness – points to which I will return later. If a party limited itself in terms of potential

government partners it may find itself more frequently on the opposition benches than it would wish.

So the voters and the numbers matter in changing political minds and political culture.

Irish voters now expect coalition to work. And if it doesn't they will blame those they believe have failed to make it work.

So what make this involuntary activity for political parties work or not as the case may be.

The key lessons I have taken from my time involved in government and observing Irish coalition government is the need for three things above all - trust, respect and generosity.

Through-out the years of coalition government in Ireland there are some positive and not so positive examples of trust, respect and confidence building.

I mentioned Albert Reynolds earlier who called coalition government a "temporary little arrangement".

Well less than three years later, Albert found himself as leader of Fianna Fail and Prime Minister of a coalition government.

It won't surprise you to learn that given the lack of respect he showed there was little trust and those coalition partners quickly found a reason to exit his government and cause an election which didn't go well for Albert or Fianna Fail.

In the 1990's Ministers and advisers were locked out of government buildings, official reports were edited to suit the political agenda of one party, surprise announcements were made without consultation and one cabinet minister suggesting to their coalition partners that they had 'come for a head' (or a resignation).

The lack of trust and respect were also a major talking point of government negotiations after the 1992 general election. Talks between Fine Gael and Labour broke down over what was seen as lack of respect shown by the larger of the two parties towards what would be their junior coalition partners.

In contrast during the 1970s coalition government there are stories of the two party leaders meeting over a bottle of whiskey in the Prime Minister's office.

Building that trust and respect is important but so are the policies on which the government will focus

And the negotiations on what we call the "Programme for Government" are now a vital part of coalition government

In the case of the government, I was involved in, the negotiations for that coalition agreement took just under two weeks. Contrasting this, the minority government facilitated in a Confidence and Supply Arrangement in 2016, took approximately 70 days, or 10 weeks. Each situation is unique.

This is naturally an intense period of time for everyone involved, and there are many ingredients required but again namely, building trusted relationships, generosity and respect.

In the period before elections, each party will obviously set out its own policy platform. What each party will also do is analyse and compare the policy positions of other parties, especially those they may be open to coalescing. Finding agreement or consensus on some policy issues assists the early negotiation process.

It allows the key negotiators – in the Irish context, these are normally a limited number of senior politicians from each party and trusted party advisers – to move swiftly into the detail of the agreement. More time and discussion may later be needed on the complex, controversial or costly policies.

The general Irish experience is that Party leaders do not participate in the negotiations on the policy programme for government. Instead, they set the boundaries and criteria for negotiations, and briefed daily by their own negotiating team. The leaders remain focused on the strategic objective of government, on cabinet formation and are available to agree any outstanding issues and ultimately, the final programme.

With all this said, there is an argument that given the uncertain and volatile world we are all living in now that the line-by-line approach to policy agreements are losing value. It is the evolving top priorities and public and national need that is focused upon.

Once the Government is formed building formal and informal structures around coalition government is the Enabling scaffolding which helps it work

In other words creating the scaffolding around the policy platforms is as important as agreeing them. In Ireland, an independent civil service play an important role in both facilitating and advising on policy and its potential implementation.

A sophisticated Cabinet Committee system has evolved to allow for the coalition leaders and the relevant Cabinet Ministers as well as their senior civil servants to share and present policy plans for discussion before reaching the Cabinet table. This enables them to discuss complex or sensitive issues which cause public unease, the options available, the costs or budget overruns involved. Stark facts can be considered and firm views made clear.

In advance of reaching the Cabinet Committee, a senior officials group meets approximately a week in advance. Political advisers also attend. Documentation is shared and discussed. It is a constructive forum to draw out the key issues in advance of the Cabinet Committee. It provides a view of what is coming forward and reduces the element of surprise.

During the financial crisis, a special Cabinet Committee was established – called the Economic Management Council. With limited membership, of the Party Leaders, their senior economic Ministers, senior civil servants and advisers, it focused on managing and progressing economic matters and emerging issues during that period where the troika was involved. It was an effective and agile committee. However,

like many things in life, for those who were not included in its membership, it was not as well regarded.

Political advisers are also an asset for Government Ministers. Rarely popular with the media, the public and many politicians – the number of political advisers and programme managers have grown from their unofficial origins of the 1980s to a formal and vital part of government since the 1990s.

Directly employed by their Minister, they assist and support them in their policy, legislative, political agenda. They too understand the need to build good working relationships between parties. The Irish adviser network in government assists the established framework by also holding weekly adviser meetings to share information, trouble shoot, focus in on legislative issues, highlight what memos may emerge at a forthcoming government meeting.

The weekly Leader's meetings then benefit from this network of advance meeting structures. It allows for this strategic relationship to continue to strengthen so that when political or policy issues do arise, they are in a good position to manage them.

In the current coalition for example each of the three party leaders have a Chief of Staff and the relationship between these three is pivotal to problem solving and cross government communication.

The overall objective of these structures is to lower the risk of conflict around the cabinet table. The more issues that can be agreed and resolved in advance of cabinet helps build a government consensus.

All of this is based on the understanding that any serious disagreement at the Cabinet table, especially along party lines, will effectively end the government. Votes at cabinet have to be avoided as they simply point out the division and will be the first discussion in the subsequent election campaign.

For the parliamentary party, who do not have the benefit of this internal government network, the importance of communicating regularly, promoting inclusivity, listening to and managing differing expectations and perspectives is important. More regularly than not, there will be dissatisfaction on an issue and having a reliable engagement and communications mechanism is beneficial to the party and the leaders.

In all of this, trust between coalition partners is critical and in this the quality of personal relationships is key. Issues arise and challenges present themselves. There may indeed be moments of crisis that will test the foundations of a coalition. It is in these moments that the quality of working relationships is key. And to build on my scaffolding metaphor it is when trust has broken down and suspicion has taken root, that the edifice collapses.

Since the election of 2016, Irish parliamentary committees have also increased their legislative scope. This important feature of the Irish parliament – although time consuming in that it can slow down the Bill's progress – allows for pre-legislative scrutiny of draft government legislation by cross-party committees. It seeks to improve democracy by opening up the draft legislation to focus and minimize amendments to the legislation at a later date.

From the Irish experience there is a key warning for the Smaller parties who enter Government.

Entering negotiations and/or government is not straightforward especially for the smaller or junior partners. There is a history of smaller parties in Ireland losing out in subsequent elections, and the recent experience of the Liberal Democrats in the UK is another example of this. While the national interest is served the party can lose out.

I am getting a tired of hearing people say that the 2011-2016 Government in Ireland will be well regarded by history and historians (in politics the real currency is votes and parties have not been rewarded by voters by what economists, historians or academics might consider doing the 'right thing'). My advice for small parties is Go into it with eyes wide open! There is no guarantee that you will thrive at the ballot box.

It is no doubt tricky for the smaller parties to maintain their identity in a coalition but there is a real opportunity to implement policy priorities – and in many ways smaller parties have punched above their weight in terms of delivery on policy priorities.

In the case of my own party we progressed substantial and much delayed law reform and major changes in economic and social policy during our time in government. Some of this progress was achieved in tandem with the coalition building exercise of the Citizen's Assembly, Ireland's innovative exercise in deliberative democracy – and a subject that would merit separate discussion in its own right.

In Conclusion

I want to draw on the wisdom of perhaps one of the most famous lawyers, Abraham Lincoln, when he said: “The best way to predict the future is to help shape it.”

I hope that after this presentation you do not take the Irish experience of coalition as anything other than an opportunity to observe how others have experimented and use that as just one of evidence to shape your own unique circumstances.

For you, here in South Africa, you will have to find your own way, take the best learnings from other experiences, make your own mistakes but be open to the potential and hopefully find your own successful ways to shape the future of government in this country.

All political parties are in their own way coalitions, so there is already experience of how to work with different perspectives and different personalities that shape the dynamics of politics and policy making.

The Irish experience is only one source of information but I believe that coalition government has played a major and positive role in our political, economic and social evolution in recent decades.

That includes making our way through many of the economic and political crisis of the last 15 years as I mentioned earlier. But I believe coalition government and coalition building has also played a vital role in social change in Ireland and during the Irish Peace Process by allowing different parties in the Republic of Ireland build important relationships within Northern Ireland and the UK.

There are many lessons from history but a very basic one is that trying to export political experience from one part of the globe to another is rarely, if ever, going to work.

The phrase an 'Irish solution to an Irish problem' is both a compliment and criticism but perhaps best placed to give a context to how you should absorb any learnings from the Irish experience of coalition government.

As you explore the options for South Africa, I wish you luck and a commitment that many are available to discuss ideas and experiences if they can be beneficial to your work.

As an old Irish saying goes "Go n-éirí an bothár leat" - May the road rise to meet you to make your journey as easy as possible.

THANK YOU