

# Brexit and the new Irish Government

*The Republic of Ireland finally has a new government following February's indecisive election result. Former Irish ambassador **Dr Ray Bassett** looks at the consequences for Brexit and for Ireland's relations with the EU.*

The formation of a new Irish government under Micheál Martin – a three-party coalition including Fine Gael, the party of outgoing Taoiseach Leo Varadkar – raises the question of whether this will herald a change in the country's attitude to Brexit. Martin will serve as Taoiseach for two years followed by a return of Varadkar at that point. This was part of the coalition deal.

The reality is that the change of government in Dublin is highly unlikely to make any material difference to the Irish State's Brexit policy. The programme for government agreed by the three parties includes the Orwellian proclamation:

*"As we rebuild our economy and reimagine our society, we will renew our role in Europe and the world. Ireland's total commitment to the aims and ideals of the European Union (EU) has been a consistent feature of our membership."*

True, the third party in the alliance, the Greens, has shown some independent thought on EU matters, including opposition to Ireland's participation in PESCO, which establishes 'permanent structured cooperation' on defence matters. But it is extremely doubtful that the two larger parties in government will allow for any serious deviation from the long-established narrative that a core value of Irish foreign policy is adherence to the Brussels line.

While the party of Micheál Martin, Fianna Fáil, was originally eurosceptic under its founder Eamon De Valera (as explained in my forthcoming book *Ireland and the EU Post Brexit*), those days have long since gone. Martin, like Varadkar, has long championed the cause of European integration. The video below gives an illustration of his views on the EU and more particularly on Brexit.

However, there are many within his party who are less enthusiastic for the cause of 'ever closer union', and Martin's position as leader is precarious. It is generally accepted that he made a mess of his ministerial appointments and alienated many of his senior party colleagues, so it is a moot point how long he will remain as leader.

While the change of government in itself will not cause a change in policy on Brexit, something more fundamental is already having an effect – namely the prospect of a no-deal outcome at the end of the year. The Irish establishment bet heavily on the Remainers succeeding in Britain – and that hope has proved forlorn.

A no-deal outcome would be very deleterious for the Irish Republic. Hence, the old hard-line rhetoric of Leo Varadkar has softened and a new reality has emerged. While the Irish Government may detest Brexit, it is here to stay.

In the Programme for Government lines have appeared, such as new commitments to,

*"Supporting the closest possible relationship between the EU and the UK in the strategic interests of Ireland, north and south, and British-Irish relations."*

and

*"Having a tariff-free, quota-free, trade agreement with strong level playing field provisions, including robust*

*environmental and labour standards."*

Therefore, the Irish Government, including the new Chair of the Eurogroup (Eurozone Finance Ministers) Pascal O'Donoghue, will exercise a more benign influence behind the scenes in Europe. But it will not be done because of any great desire to assist the government in London, but out of necessity.