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It's housing, stupid!

With homelessness and affordability at crisis levels, housing takes centre stage in Ireland's election — and the far right is quick to exploit it

Right-wing extremists in Europe are exploiting the scarcity of affordable housing. In November 2023, Geert Wilders' Freedom Party put migration as the force driving *endemic* Dutch problems such as the lack of housing — and won. In Spain, where affordable housing is also scarce, the third largest, far-right Vox party wants to restrict foreigners from purchasing property. Supposedly, they receive preferential treatment. In fact, most anti-foreigner sentiment in Spain is due to 'touristification': As in Italy, Airbnbs have removed many properties from the housing market — and created a crisis.

But it is 'the land of a hundred thousand welcomes', Ireland, that has witnessed scores of protests and even arson at properties designated for refugees and asylum seekers. In the country whose population was forced to *emigrate* for centuries, demonstrators claim: 'Ireland is Full'. Nonsense. That said, young Irish people *are* leaving — in search of affordable housing. This and immigration are key issues in the upcoming elections.

On Friday, 29 November, Ireland elects its lower house of parliament, the Dáil Éireann. The Saturday before, hundreds rallied against racism and the far right one year after Dublin's biggest-ever riots. They followed reports that a 'migrant' had stabbed three children and their teacher in the city centre. Over several hours, as many as 500 mostly young men looted shops and torched buses, a tram and *garda* (police) cars. They also attacked a shelter for asylum seekers. Racist chants were clearly audible.

An ongoing crisis

Ireland is a case study of government failures that embolden the hard right through inadequate policies and poor communication. Since 2000, some 16 strategies, programmes and initiatives, including the call to anchor the right to housing in the Constitution, have not stemmed what

Dr Ruth McManus of Dublin City University terms Dublin's *ongoing* 'housing crisis'.

Under British rule, private philanthropy built housing for Dublin's poor and working classes. Yet by the 1913 Lockout, it featured Great Britain's worst slums. The government recognised that cramped living conditions could fuel more unrest and began to think about constructing housing. In 1924, inspired by the 'Garden City' movement, work began on newly independent Dublin's first large-scale suburban development: Some 1 300 homes-for-purchase were built, along with recreational space, schools, shops, a church, a library and a health centre. In the 1930s and 1940s, other large housing estates were built — albeit with smaller, lower quality homes. The 1960s saw large-scale slum clearance; up to 50 per cent of Dublin's housing was provided by the city.

Despite the social housing scheme of 2021, the housing and homeless crisis has worsened.

Thatcherism then inspired the Irish state to sell off public housing and later governments welcomed in international vulture funds to build rental properties. But increased private sector supply does not increase affordability. The Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) reported a 300 per cent increase of people living in private rentals between 1991 and 2016, some substandard. Nevertheless, the government persisted in relying on private rentals 'to meet almost 70 per cent of social housing need'. SVP noted in October 2024 that despite the social housing scheme of 2021, the housing and homeless crisis has worsened.

In September 2024, 14 760 people were living in emergency accommodation, 4 561 of them children. The reality of homelessness is much worse. The homeless figures do not include couch surfers and those living in domestic abuse shelters and overcrowded accommodation. And 66 per cent of people aged 18 to 34 are still living with their parents. As for the 2025 budget, Simon Communities of Ireland comments: '[A]ddressing homelessness requires significant investment. However,... the social and financial costs of inaction are greater.'

Tenant insecurity is another issue: Leases of unlimited duration are not automatic. No-fault evictions loom. So far this year, 15 006 households have received 'notices of termination'. Particularly children, who may have to move away from their friends and switch schools suddenly, suffer anxiety. Young people cannot even think about starting families.

Yet the government continues to rely on home ownership — eating up more and more of Dublin's fertile hinterland for a suburban lifestyle with its inevitable climate-killing dependency on private cars.

Absurd policies

The boom years of the Celtic Tiger brought a huge number of migrants to Ireland. But in 2013, a law illegalising bedsits removed tens of thousands of affordable dwellings from the housing market, driving up homelessness.

Ireland still needs workers, though, and has expanded its permitted occupations to include meteorologists, play therapists, electricians and pig farm assistants. One third of migrants work in healthcare, more than a fifth in IT and financial services. The latest data from the Central Statistics Office notes that 80 000 migrants were added to the population in the year before April 2024. Most came to work or study, with 33 000 new work permits and 19 000 student visas (allowing part-time work) issued. More than 90 000 EU and UK migrants, who need no permits, also came.

In February 2022, the Irish government and local communities welcomed Ukrainians fleeing Russia's full-scale invasion. Most Irish people continue to welcome the 85 000 Ukrainians living in Ireland, and support migration. But half of the Ukrainians benefiting from 'temporary protection' are stranded in government 'direct provision' centres, while those in private accommodation were hit by a massive cut in welfare support in spring 2024. The 36 per cent who are working can't afford market rents. By late August, 14 037 other nationals had sought international protection in Ireland this year.

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Ireland was not prepared for such a massive influx. The government has turned over emergency accommodation for refugees and asylum seekers to private, for-profit companies and poorly communicated its plans to local communities. Opening accommodations in communities that lack family doctors and housing, public spaces for social gatherings and the like is grist for the hard-right mill. Far-right groups easily spread racist messaging that locals must compete with 'dangerous new arrivals' for services. Added to that, in December 2023, its capacity exhausted, the International Protection

Office handed out tents, sleeping bags and cash to applicants. Months later, encampments in central Dublin were repeatedly dismantled. Another absurd situation: To house the homeless, the government rented a hotel where others had been living for 14 years — and now face eviction. Furthermore, *garda* have been slow to react to violence against refugees and migrants.

Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Simon Harris maintained that 'homelessness numbers are heavily impacted by the fact we are seeing many people seek protection in our country'. His comments were heard as a dog whistle to anti-immigrant forces: The figures are *not* linked.

Brian Killoran of the Immigrant Council of Ireland writes: 'The government appears to be taking aim at the soft target of refugees themselves. That is deeply problematic, socially divisive and distracts from discussing the core challenge we face and that is housing.'

In June 2024, three anti-immigration candidates were elected to the Dublin City Council (63 members), two of whom have actively protested asylum housing. Far-right rhetoric is also patriarchal and white supremacist. Dr Barry Cannon of Maynooth University says, 'It's a sort of isolationist nationalism that hasn't done very well in recent decades in Ireland. But Ireland *was* a sort of far-right state — back before the 1980s: nativist and deeply religious… with a conservative worldview.'

One day out, the future direction of Irish politics is impossible to predict.

Hard-right candidates are also running in this general election. Among them, Irish Freedom Party president Hermann Kelly, who aspires to a 'mono cultural society'. A self-styled 'citizen journalist' who published disinformation during the Dublin riots and was found guilty of 'threatening and abusive behaviour' created the 'Ireland First' party. 'Fake independents' could help prop up the ruling centre-right parties (in coalition with the Greens), Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil (a.k.a. 'FFG' because they're seen as interchangeable), that have dominated Irish politics for 100 years. Will voters reward them for the Budget 2025 giveaways? Or will they reject what Ireland's largest union denounces as their 'irresponsible attempt […] to buy an election'? The third major party, nationalist

Sinn Fein, could make a comeback. But FFG rule out governing with them. Yet no party has fielded enough candidates to govern alone: a coalition with a smaller party will be necessary. Cobbling one together should take time.

Without the 'radical strategic reset' recommended by the Housing Commission to the 'man-made, politically midwifed housing crisis ....[that] exemplifies the kind of social implosion empowering uber-right forces challenging once-secure democracies all around the world', there will be no relief. *That* won't come from neoliberal FFG.

A fifth of Irish voters are undecided. One day out, the future direction of Irish politics is impossible to predict.

Will the Irish and other European governments enact the policies needed to thwart greater far-right successes? Will they systematically counter disinformation and support valuable, in-depth journalism? Will they explain the value of immigrants *and* address justifiable concerns about inadequate infrastructure — thus ensuring secure, affordable, decent and sustainable accommodation for all?

And will the European Parliament heed the call of Housing Europe's President Bent Madsen to combat speculation in the housing market and adopt the (forthcoming) EU Affordable Housing Plan?

Or will they help the hard right make further inroads?

It's *housing*, stupid!



Nancy du Plessis

Nancy du Plessis studied urban design. She has engaged in tenant struggles in New York, Paris and Berlin and published five 'long reads' on gentrification and housing.