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IRELAND

Solid swansong from caretaker government

Dawn Wheatley

Political context

Any discussion of Ireland's political communication COVID-19 response should start with the general election on February 8, 2020, which saw the three biggest parties (Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin) each secure 20–25% support. As no government was immediately formed, the leader and ministers overseeing the early stage of the crisis were part of a caretaker administration, continuing in their Departments until late June.

As ongoing coalition negotiations took a backseat, the political focus remained on the outgoing government led by the centre-right Fine Gael, in power since 2011. Taoiseach Leo Varadkar (equivalent to prime minister) was leader since 2017, with no certainty that he would return to office. As Taoiseach, 41-year-old Varadkar was somewhat divisive. For some, he illustrated Ireland's progression from an inward-looking, social conservatism; Varadkar is the son of an Indian migrant and appears publicly with his male partner. For others, however, Varadkar represents a Dublin-centric neoliberal elite: privately educated, doctor, supposedly with little understanding or empathy for those struggling with low incomes and poor housing.

It took until June 15 for an agreed programme for government between the two centre-right parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, and the Green Party. Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin took over as Taoiseach on June 27, just two days before some of the most severe COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, with Varadkar taking on the deputy prime minister role (Tánaiste). This change in leadership was, of course, a pivotal moment: overall, the public had responded positively to the outgoing government's handling of the pandemic. Fine Gael, which polled 21% of first-preference votes in February's election, reached 37% support in an *Irish Times* opinion poll in mid-June. It showed 75% personal

approval for Varadkar, a national level only exceeded in the 1990s following the Northern Ireland peace process. This period of change in late June would, therefore, be a critical juncture in Ireland's response, feeling like the natural end of the initial COVID-19 chapter given the new faces in Cabinet and the easing of many restrictions.

Chronology

Initial Irish media reports unsurprisingly focused on China, and the first case in the Republic of Ireland was March 11. A few days previously, March 8, the *Business Post* newspaper's front-page headline caused a stir: 'Irish health authorities predict 1.9m will fall ill with coronavirus.' There was some backlash suggesting this was fearmongering, but the editor responded saying, 'The headline is an accurate reflection of predictions...I agree it is scary but it is being repeated by other credible sources this morning so it is not irresponsible' (Oakley, 2020). See Table 22.1.

Regarding official public addresses, March 12 marked the most serious one up to that point. Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, in Washington DC for the annual St Patrick's Day trip, announced that childcare, schools and universities would close. On St Patrick's Day itself (March 17), the Taoiseach gave another televised address from the Government Buildings podium in Dublin. He was widely praised for this 11-minute address, with one PR analysis describing it as a 'career-defining speech': '[It was delivered in] a confident and disciplined manner that has achieved its aim of reassuring Irish citizens while also creating a stronger sense of unity that will be needed in the coming months' (Rosney, 2020). Varadkar gave a similar-style address on March 27, announcing the most stringent 2km restrictions, drawing on Ireland's political history by acknowledging how 'freedom was hard-won in our country, and it jars with us to restrict and limit individual liberties' (MerrionStreet.ie, 2020). Throughout April, cases would rise steeply, moving from 3,235 total cases (71 total deaths) on April 1, up to 20,253 total cases (1,190 deaths) on April 30.

On May 1, the government announced the five-phase 'Roadmap for reopening society and business,' spanning three-week intervals between May and August (later adjusted with many restrictions eased in late June). Varadkar provided this information in another national address rather than a press conference which frustrated those arguing that the plans' significance warranted journalistic scrutiny. Instead, Varadkar appeared on the RTÉ television chat show, *The Late Late Show*, that night.

Political and social issues

Ireland went through similar concerns as other countries regarding personal protective equipment (PPE) and testing efficiency, especially in the initial period when fear and uncertainty were rampant. Outbreaks in nursing/care homes were

TABLE 22.1 Ireland chronology

Date		Diffusion of COVID-19	Key official actions	Key communication events
January	5			First Irish media reports. Headline on TheJournal.ie: ‘Mysterious Pneumonia Outbreak in China Is Not the Return of SARS Virus, Officials Say.’
	27		National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) for COVID-19 established in Department of Health.	
February	20		Health Service Executive adds COVID-19 to list of notifiable diseases.	
	28	First confirmed case on island (in Northern Ireland. Travelled via Dublin Airport).		
March	29	First case confirmed in Republic, associated with trip to Italy.		Daily Department of Health/NPHE daily media briefings begin.
	8		St Patrick’s Day (March 17) festivities cancelled.	
	11	First COVID-19 death in Republic (35 total cases).		
	12		Closure of schools, universities and childcare. Mass gatherings cancelled.	Speech from Leo Varadkar in Washington DC: ‘This is uncharted territory. We said we would take the right actions at the right time. We have to move now to have the greatest impact.’

13	Department of Foreign Affairs advises 'a high degree of caution' before travelling to other EU states.		
15	Total cases exceed 100.		St Patrick's Day address from Varadkar: 'In years to come let them say of us, when things were at their worst, we were at our best.'
17	Pubs ordered to close.		
24	1,125 total cases. 6 deaths.	Closure of non-essential retailers/services (eg, gyms, hairdressers, cinemas). Cafes and restaurants limited to take away. Sports events cancelled.	
24		Temporary COVID-19 employment schemes announced.	
27	Total: 1,819 cases. 19 deaths.	People ordered to stay at home for two weeks except for essential travel. Exercise within 2km.	TV address from Varadkar: 'These are radical actions aimed at saving as many lives as possible...I am asking us for a time, to forego our personal liberties and freedoms for a greater cause.'
April	4	Death toll reaches 100+.	
6	Total cases exceed 5,000.		
8		Garda (police) law passes to allow officers to redirect people home if caught in breach of guidelines.	
10	7,393 cases. 263 deaths.	2km lockdown period extended.	
18			
20	Cases total 15,000+ (610 deaths).		Chief Medical Officer claims the 'curve has flattened' during TV interview.

(Continued)

TABLE 22.1 (Continued)

	Date	Diffusion of COVID-19	Key official actions	Key communication events
May	30	Cases 20,000+ (1,190 deaths).	Publication of five-phase 'Roadmap for reopening society and business' restrictions slowly lifted mid-May–mid-August.	Varadkar avoids journalists' questions on plan, instead appears on TV chat show.
	1		Exercise extended to 5km from home.	
	5		June's Leaving Certificate state exams cancelled.	
	8	Total deaths exceed 1,500.	Phase 1: can meet groups of 4 outdoors. Garden/hardware shops reopen.	
	15			
June	18			
	2	Total cases 25,000 (1,650 deaths).	Phase 2: travel within 20km and/or within own county allowed. Meet up to 6 people indoors/outdoors allowed. Most retail reopens.	Varadkar's final TV appearance as Taoiseach: discusses what he would have done different, citing better PPE stockpiling and earlier testing in nursing/care homes.
	8			
	23			
	27		New government/Cabinet takes power: Micheál Martin new Taoiseach, Varadkar now deputy leader (Tánaiste). New Minister for Health appointed.	
	29	25,417 cases. 1,731 deaths.	Phase 3: travel anywhere in the country allowed. Certain pubs (serving food), gyms, hairdressers etc. reopen.	

also a crucial dimension, with scrutiny shifting to clusters in meat-processing factories and direct provision asylum centres later in the summer.

In late March, the government announced the Wage Subsidy Scheme for employers to top-up salaries, and the weekly €350 Pandemic Payment Support for those who lost jobs. In its June update, the national statistics office noted standard unemployment of 5.6%, but a COVID-inclusive measure of 26.1%, reaching 51% for those aged 15–24 (Central Statistics Office, 2020). Varadkar caused a backlash at one point after suggesting some people were profiting from the €350 scheme, reigniting his anti-welfare reputation.

Various public information campaigns were prominent and effective regarding hand hygiene and social distancing. Another campaign targeting healthcare workers entitled ‘Be on call for Ireland’ aimed to fast-track recruitment, while the ‘Answer Ireland’s call’ campaign targeted Irish healthcare workers overseas. Other campaigns included the ‘In this together: stay connected, stay apart’ and ‘stay local’ messaging. Small initiatives were also evident from state agencies, e.g. the national postal service issued every household with two postcards to post for free with a ‘sending love’ message, while RTÉ broadcast education-based programming as part of its ‘Home School Hub’ for children. One notable civil-society initiative was the Feed the Heroes campaign which took donations for takeaway/restaurant food to healthcare workers. It ended on June 9, having raised €1.37m and delivering 180,000 meals to front-line staff over 11 weeks.

Analysis

The main faces

Despite the election result, there was no real question over the legitimacy of the Taoiseach and ministers overseeing COVID-19. Although hashtags such as #notmytaoiseach were used by frustrated individuals who felt the outgoing administration had no mandate, it was never a dominant narrative as their presence until new government formation is constitutionally sound. Elsewhere, all regulations were initially applicable on a nationwide level with no regional government/federal factors at play (beyond minor council-level decisions, for example regarding parks) meaning the focus remained on national figures.

Varadkar was at the fore, regularly accompanied at press conferences alongside Cabinet colleagues such as Minister for Health Simon Harris and others. Throughout the pandemic’s peak, daily press conferences (starting on February 29) featured the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) Tony Holohan and/or other senior health officials and journalists. They were typically held around the same time (early evening) each day, providing a sense of consistency on latest case/death figures. On June 5, the Department of Health announced that these briefings would be reduced to twice a week, with daily figures provided through press releases. During these daily media briefings, CMO Holohan rose from a relatively unknown figure to a key voice with mass admiration for his calm,

reassuring demeanour. He earned further respect for his dedication despite personal challenges after announcing in early July that he was temporarily stepping aside to be with his wife who had entered palliative care. The Taoiseach paid tribute: ‘Every home in Ireland has come to know Dr Tony Holohan...As a country, we owe him and his family a great debt of gratitude.’ Holohan also chaired NPHET (National Public Health Emergency Team) which provided advice to the government. The Taoiseach and ministers repeatedly said they based decisions on public health advice, but this led some critics to suggest that unelected NPHET officials – not the government – were running the country (Ryan, 2020).

Regardless of the dynamics behind the scenes, for many onlookers, Varadkar’s leadership was praiseworthy, particularly his early communication, highlighting the challenges ahead. During a radio panel discussion assessing the Taoiseach’s response, political journalist Lise Hand noted Varadkar and (Minister for Health) Simon Harris ‘decided that communication and laying all the cards of the table was key to bring everybody along with them’ (RTE .ie, 2020). Writer Peter Sheridan, on the same panel, suggested Varadkar was ‘head and shoulders above’ Boris Johnson and Donald Trump combined and as a doctor Varadkar ‘knows how to speak to people around medical issues and there’s an empathy there, but there’s also a strictness there...he did it really brilliantly.’ Sheridan’s comments raise two important points. First, Ireland was regularly compared with the US and UK, two countries from which Irish audiences consume much media. Secondly, Sheridan highlighted Varadkar’s medical qualifications, perhaps a factor in public trust. Varadkar also gained international attention after re-registering as a doctor and working one shift a week on a patient helpline.

As mentioned, following the May 1 speech announcing the five-phase roadmap, Varadkar avoided journalists’ questioning, instead appearing on chat show *The Late, Late Show*. For one question, the Taoiseach had to check details and pull notes from his pocket. Some interpreted this as poor preparation, not instilling confidence in his leadership and the planned phases, but many onlookers were more sympathetic. A Twitter poll by broadcaster Eoghan McDermott asked, ‘Did Leo checking his notes bother you?’ 96% of the 6,660 respondents were ‘not bothered,’ with many saying they prefer having accurate information rather than bluffing (McDermott, 2020). Of course, Varadkar did not escape criticism. Some pointed out how he simply read speeches probably written by others, while his inclusion of pop-culture quotes (such as *Lord of the Rings* and *Terminator*) was questioned. In particular, using a line from the *Mean Girls* teen film (‘The limit does not exist’) as part of a celebrity bet irked some, and Varadkar even ended up defending this in his final *Prime Time* interview as Taoiseach.

Many opposition politicians did not get much media space during the crisis; given it was the aftermath of an election, there was perhaps less at stake. Moreover, they were effectively squeezed out by scientific/medical experts who provided insight and critique on government decisions. One example was

immunologist Prof. Luke O'Neill who regularly appeared in media advocating for mandatory face masks in public places, at odds with government guidelines.

Consistency and accuracy

All schools closed in March with ambiguity over reopening as many parents, balancing work and care, were left frustrated at the 'dithering' (O'Connell, 2020). The Leaving Certificate exams, which take place in early June and determine university access, faced uncertainty since March. Despite repeated official suggestions that they would take place, the exams were eventually cancelled on May 7.

Some media outlets tackled misinformation circulating on social media (Bohan, 2020), while the Taoiseach advised people to 'seek information only from trusted sources' (Varadkar, 2020). Thankfully, there were few major examples of officials providing inaccurate information, and any missteps were relatively short-lived. One Friday evening (March 27), the Taoiseach announced the closure of non-essential workplaces from midnight, but the list of workplaces was not published until the following day causing uncertainty for employers/staff. Elsewhere, Minister for Health Simon Harris, generally praised, slipped up on radio referencing 18 previous coronaviruses (instead of '-19' coming from 2019). The Chief Medical Officer corrected it during a press conference, and Harris posted a Twitter video owning up to his mistake and apologising, saying he can be an 'awful old idiot at times,' citing 'cabin fever' and workload (Carswell, 2020).

Yet the communication issue which may have had the most significant impact relates to face masks, with Harris admitting in early June that guidance had been unclear. He told the Dáil (parliament): 'I accept that the evidence, and maybe even the messaging on this, has changed over time. Perhaps it has been confusing for people and has not got through in the clear way it needs to' (Harris, 2020). Furthermore, it seems the resistance towards enforcement was at odds with public opinion: one mid-June poll showed 68% supported the mandatory wearing of face masks in enclosed public spaces (Ireland Thinks, 2020). Although further facemask regulations would come later in the summer, the early ambiguity and associated debates were potentially damaging.

Appropriate action?

In late February, no formal government decisions had been taken regarding closures or cancelling events, inaction criticised by those fearful of the looming threat. Attention fixed on an Ireland–Italy Six Nations rugby match scheduled for Dublin on March 7; concerns focused on the influx of visitors from COVID-hotspot Italy, alongside visions of 50,000 fans inside a stadium. Ultimately, on February 25, the Department of Health recommended the game's postponement, with the IRFU rugby federation initially appearing resistant before eventually cancelling.

As March began, media discussed whether St Patrick's Day festival events (around the March 17 national holiday) should proceed. Eventually, on March 8, the government announced all festivities were cancelled. Many felt this was too late coming – some towns had already cancelled theirs – and a similar pattern was evident the following week regarding pubs and restaurants. Restaurant Association of Ireland chairman Adrian Cummins pleaded with Varadkar and two other ministers on March 14: 'I am appealing to you – trigger the closure of licenced premises – Our staff are appealing for it. #SocialDistancing not being observed by customers. It's responsible and it's leadership,' while #closethepubs was trending that day. Given pub culture's popularity in Ireland, especially around St Patrick's Day, it appeared the government lagged behind the public mood.

Overall, there was little resistance to the restrictions. However, in May, two journalists-turned-activists took a High Court case challenging the constitutionality of some legislation. The judge scathingly dismissed Gemma O'Doherty and John Waters' case, drawing on the misinformation zeitgeist, noting the applicants' lack of scientific expertise: 'Unsubstantiated opinions, speeches, empty rhetoric and a bogus historical parallel are not a substitute for facts' (O'Faolain, 2020). O'Doherty and Waters are well known so the case received media attention but little public backing, perhaps because both have reputations for questionable alt-right nationalistic movements which have little support in Ireland.

Conversely, some scientists feared things were returning to normal too soon and Ireland should take the opportunity to 'crush the curve,' acknowledging that thus far, the public supported the restrictions and 'they clearly understood the need.' However, as they wrote in early June, now there was 'a fork in the road,' forming the basis of their petition garnering more than 1,300 signatures, led by the science and medical field (O'Sullivan, 2020).

Conclusion

During a June 25 press conference, Varadkar identified two areas in which the official COVID-19 response could have improved: firstly, better PPE stockpiling and, secondly, more early testing in nursing/care homes. Despite this, polling figures ultimately showed broad support for government actions. Varadkar is known for valuing strategic communication – some critics suggest he is spin-obsessed – but was effective here. At almost all times, the public broadly understood the guidance regarding hygiene, work, travel, visiting family and gathering in public. As well as the consistency of daily briefings, May's 'five phases' provided a clear schedule. Throughout, NPHET's support to the government gave the impression of cohesion and evidence-based decision-making; politicians informed by – not at odds with – health experts. Of course, the legacy of COVID-19 decision-making may only fully surface in years to come when, for example, the repercussions of suspending medical procedures such as breast cancer screenings are understood, and a more contextualised assessment is made regarding the effective shutdown of the country.

This chapter focuses on the early response. Ireland was at a crossroads in late June 2020: the trust and confidence associated with Varadkar and senior ministers were reset as new politicians took over these key roles. While the successful launch of the contact-tracing app was one of July's positives, cracks continued to appear during the summer ensuring it was challenging for the newer political figures to establish such positive relations with the public. General fatigue towards some regulations, confusion over travel guidelines, a gradual second wave of cases (although deaths remained low), the return of serious restrictive measures at some local county levels and backward moves on social gathering rules triggered frustration. One high-profile GP on Twitter, Dr Maitiú Ó Tuathail, summed it up with the question:

What's different now to March? In short, the messaging! In March it was clear what we were trying to do, there was a plan – we were aiming to flatten the curve...At the moment we are stumbling from one set of restrictions to another.

(Ó Tuathail, 2020)

Public anger peaked in late August after some senior political figures attended a parliamentary golf society dinner breaching public health guidelines, leading to resignations by a minister and a European Commissioner. The revelations infuriated many who had made huge personal sacrifices over the previous six months; restoring public trust would be a major challenge facing the new government ahead of the virus's autumn-winter phase.

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