

Analysis

Once seen as Ireland's Justin Trudeau, progressive credentials of Leo Varadkar now in doubt

After promising start, Irish prime minister who's been compared to Trudeau and Macron faces growing dissent

By Don Duncan, [for CBC News](#) Posted: Sep 21, 2017 5:00 AM ET Last Updated: Sep 21, 2017 8:00 AM ET

When Ireland's youngest prime minister, Leo Varadkar, took office in June, he broke through two glass ceilings at once. He became both the first gay and first mixed-race person to lead the country.

Varadkar also joined leaders like Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, French President Emmanuel Macron and [London Mayor Sadiq Khan](#) — young, photogenic, progressive-seeming men with a keen aptitude for communications. Their respective arrivals to power were seen as push-backs to the growing tide of populism in the U.S. and across Europe.

The Irish prime minister's rise to power got an enthusiastic reception in the international press, which made him the poster boy of an Ireland that is rapidly emerging from a conservative past dominated by the Catholic Church and embracing a new, progressive era. Time magazine even put him on the cover, with the tagline: "An island at the centre of the world."

Varadkar, the Irish-born child of an Indian father and Irish mother, used his first name, Leo, as a friendly campaign moniker, and much as with Trudeau and Macron, image and image-building are a core component of his politics.

"There are things [Irish] people like about Varadkar that they haven't seen in previous leaders," said Johnny Fallon, a political analyst in Dublin.

"He runs triathlons. He wears casual clothing, much in the style of Trudeau in Canada. But there is that doubt at the back of it all: can he still do that hard, tough policy work?"

Three months after his feted nomination as leader, or Taoiseach, as the position is known in Ireland, those lingering doubts are centre stage as parliament returns from a summer recess this week.

Ireland's love affair with "Leo" is fading.

In his June inaugural speech, Varadkar promised to "build a 'Republic of Opportunity' ... in which every citizen gets a fair go and has the opportunity to succeed." Significant groups in Irish society, however, now feel excluded from that "republic."

Varadkar's first wobble as leader came when he named his cabinet in June. Of the 34 ministers he chose for it, only seven were women — compared with Trudeau's evenly gender-balanced cabinet.

- [Trudeau, Irish PM tout benefits of Canada-EU trade pact](#)
- [Irish PM to march with Justin Trudeau in Montreal's Pride](#)
- [Sadiq Khan becomes 1st Muslim mayor of London](#)

"I think that his record on women is not great," said Clare Lanigan, a feminist and volunteer with the Abortion Rights Campaign, a lobby group pushing for a referendum to repeal an article of the constitution that [makes abortion illegal in Ireland](#).

"While I don't know the internal politics of the man, none of his actions so far show any particular commitment to women."

The same dissatisfaction extends through pro-choice circles in Ireland.

Since announcing that a referendum on abortion will be held next year, Varadkar has remained silent about when exactly it might happen, its scope and the possible language it might contain. His own position on abortion remains ambiguous.

"I think there's an assumption that if someone is LGBT, that they are therefore going to be with us [progressives], and that's a bad assumption," said Lorcan Nagle, another volunteer on the Abortion Rights Campaign.

- [Repeal 8 abortion campaign in Ireland hopes to replicate success of Poland protests](#)

"I can't help but feel that the fact that he's gay is used as an arguing point to say: 'Look, we're being progressive. We have a gay leader now.' But his sexuality doesn't make his policies any better. He's still astonishingly neo-liberal."

Falling support

This disconnect between Varadkar's modern, progressive image and his unchanging conservative politics is at the core of much of the frustration felt by those who expected Varadkar's arrival to usher in a more progressive current to his centre-right party, Fine Gael.

The change in how voters feel about Varadkar echoes the trajectory that [support for Macron took](#) in France after his election in June.

- [France's Macron tumbles from his self-styled 'Jupiter-like' eminence: Don Murray](#)
- [Rebranding the centre: Obama-backed Macron cast as populism slayer in French election](#)

Favour sparked by Macron's initially progressive, reformist image slumped once he called a meeting between the senate and parliament at Versailles and then later mentioned he wanted to rule like the Roman god Jupiter: both jarringly monarchical references for a deeply republican France. His approval ratings nosedived to 36 per cent last month from 64 per cent in June.

While Varadkar's party saw a bump in approval ratings after his rise to power in June, no polls have been conducted since.

Unlike Macron and Trudeau, though, Varadkar is not in power as a result of a national election. His ascent was the result of an internal party vote.

Varadkar's party now heads the government only through a very tenuous coalition with a handful of independent parliamentarians. With the next general election expected in the first half of next year, Varadkar has only a few months in which to prove his mettle as a leader and silence his critics.

'Jack Watson — a person — died on your watch, Leo.' - *Alan Buckley, activist*

He faces a legislative year fraught with challenges: escalating homelessness, police corruption, an unbalanced budget and dysfunction in the health-care system.

And he's already been accused by his critics of ignoring that agenda and spending too much time abroad honing his and Ireland's image.

"Where is the Taoiseach?" asked Irish radio host George Hook in an episode of his daily talk show that aired while parliament was in summer recess. "Well, the Taoiseach is in Canada."

Hook's is one of a growing number of voices calling on Varadkar to stop with the photo-ops abroad and start tackling problems at home.

"While he was [in Canada], the Taoiseach decided to attend a gay pride march [in Montreal]," said Hook.

"I think he should be attending a homeless march. I think he should be attending a balanced budget march so that we would have some government."

At a recent vigil outside the legislature, a group of housing activists echoed that sentiment and chanted their resentment at feeling excluded from Varadkar's "Republic of Opportunity."

In front of a candle-lit photograph of Jack Watson, a homeless man who had died in the streets the night before, around 50 people yelled: "What do we want? Homes for the homeless! When do we want them? Now!"

Alan Buckley called the homelessness situation "a national emergency" that Varadkar is doing nothing about.

"Jack Watson — a person — died on your watch, Leo," he called out to the crowd. "You keep telling us that we live in a country that keeps improving, that the economy is growing and that's a f--king whitewash."

Varadkar's office declined an interview for this story.

'He needs to prove that he's a real heavyweight politician'

The prime minister has said his government will start building around 2,500 units of social housing before the end of this year after near-zero social housing output for many years. He has also vowed to increase the country's natural disaster relief fund and to fight inefficiencies in the national health system.

Promises are well and good, said political analyst Fallon, but Varadkar will have to counter the growing dissent with concrete action, now that parliament has reconvened.

"He needs to prove that he's a real heavyweight politician, and thus far, that has been a challenge for him," said Fallon.

"The Irish electorate have proven that they are quite forgiving of decisions that have gone wrong simply because you've tried to do something. What they are unforgiving of is the idea of doing nothing or avoiding it. They really dislike that."

- [A reunited Ireland? That could be one of Brexit's side-effects](#)

Explore CBC			
CBC Home	Music	Documentaries	Digital Archives
TV	Life	Comedy	Games
Radio	Arts	Books	Contests
News	Kids	Parents	Site Map
Sports	Local	Indigenous	
Stay Connected			
Apps	RSS	Podcasts	Newsletters & Alerts
Services and Information			
Corporate Info	Reuse & Permission	CBC Shop	Jobs
Public Appearances	Terms of Use	Help	Doing Business with Us
Commercial Services	Privacy Policy	Contact Us	Renting Facilities