

Fianna Fáil and the long road to recovery

An analysis by Derek Mooney for Slugger O'Toole Blog

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While there are worse jobs in the world: the worst job in politics is certainly leader of the opposition.

If he didn't already know this, it is certain that Fianna Fáil's leader Micheal Martin will know this in just over a week.

The 2014 European and Local Election campaigns for which he and his HQ team have prepared and planned for over 18 months are proving themselves to be a source of unalloyed joy. It is hard to believe that these are the campaigns they wanted.

The latest round of opinion poll findings only confirm this. They suggest that

- His Dublin Euro candidate will fail to take the seat
- His Midlands North West duo may struggle to win a seat
- While his Ireland South candidates have the best part of two quotas between but are so imbalanced as to render a second seat impossible.

If the ballots cast on Friday confirm these poll findings, then it will be hard to make any of this sound like an achievement.

Add to this a series of resignations and protests over local election candidate selections, including the Blackrock Hanafiasco that has seen my onetime political rival Mary Hanafin returned as a non authorised/unrecognised Fianna Fáil candidate and you can see that the weeks ahead will be difficult ones for those at the top of the party.

The frustration of this for Martin and his supporters is that they have, on one level, a fairly decent tale to tell. If the most recent polls, which are not exactly joyous for the soldiers of destiny, are correct, then the gap between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael has closed by between 13.5% and 15.5%.

Election	Fine Gael	Fianna Fáil	Gap
<i>Local Election 2009</i>	34.7%	25%	9.7%
<i>General Election 2011</i>	36.1%	17.4%	18.7%
<i>Sunday Times B&A Poll</i> 18 May 2014	25%	22%	3%
<i>Red C Irish Sun</i> 19 May 2014	25%	20%	5%

The problem is that Fianna Fáil is not the biggest beneficiary of the decline. Fine Gael looks set to lose almost a third of the support it won in February 2011, but Fianna Fáil looks, at best, like convincing less than half of those disenchanted voters to look to it.

Where Fianna Fáil has made gains it has been among those groups it has least let down (definitely a relative term): younger and older voters. The group it has and will find hardest to convince are the middle ground – those struggling to pay mortgages and cope with massive negative equity.

Martin's twin challenge upon becoming leader was first: to halt the decline and then to try win to win back as many of those people who voted for it in 2002 and 2007, but who chose Fine Gael in 2011.

That he has succeeded in the first task is clear but, his scorecard on the second may not be as impressive. Many of those who voted Fine Gael in February are deeply disenchanted by their performance in Government.

The party that promised new politics and a major break with the way things had been done by the previous crowd, has delivered neither. Instead; it merrily implements the broad policy approaches of the last Fianna Fáil led administration without their protections for those most hurt by the recession.

Despite this, the majority of these voters are prepared to either stick with Fine Gael or look to Independents or others. While these voters are prepared to engage with Fianna Fáil candidates at the doors, particularly newer, younger candidates – they remain largely unconvinced.

Meanwhile, for a huge swathe of voters unhappy with the government, Fianna Fáil is effectively as much a part of the "government" as either Fine Gael or Labour. Right now voting Fianna Fail is most certainly not the way to go if your aim is to register protest at what the government is doing.

Martin's Fianna Fáil still has a lot of work to do to convince them, it has yet to offer a clear and comprehensive statement of either what it stands for in a post-recession Ireland or how it plans to secure and expand the recovery to benefit everyone.

While the biggest job of work it faces is on the policy side, the last few weeks and months have also exposed some serious organisational issues. The party's structures are still centred on its elected reps and candidates. Offend a candidate and you lose their organisation.

Worse still: select a bright candidate with great ideas but poor organisational abilities and you have neither the capacity nor the available expertise to help them get elected. This helps, in part, explain some of the party's problems with its MEP campaigns.

Fianna Fáil's problem with being seen as the "same as the government" is also reflected in the European Elections. While middle ground voters have not turned Eurosceptic, they are certainly euro critical. They are looking for MEPs who will go to Brussels to bang the table and tell them what for. This may explain Sinn Féin's strong European showings, plus Ming Flanagan's apparent lead over fellow Independent and long standing MEP, Marian Harkin.

The irony is that Fianna Fáil belongs to a group, ALDE, whose nominee for the Commission Presidency Guy Verhofstadt: recently reflected precisely these euro critical views in a debate with his rivals saying that the "current Commission leadership always phones Berlin & Paris before making a decision. That is the main problem"

But have you heard any of Fianna Fáil's European candidates say this forcefully in recent weeks?

The German narrative of the eurocrisis – which is also the EPP, Merkel, Sarkozy, and Barosso narrative - needs be challenged. It is something I have written about several times since mid-2011. See this one from April 2013 -

<http://derekmooney.net/2013/04/12/merkel-eu-need-to-learn-the-lessons-of-germanys-own-economic-renewal/>

Perhaps some of them will do this during the final day's debates – I sincerely hope they do.

We should be critical of Europe for precisely the reasons Verhofstadt outlined. No one knows this better than the members of the last government.

Yes, we did need Europe to help us bail out the banjaxed banks, but that help came at a massive price. Sarkozy and Merkel contrived to defend the Euro on the cheap on Irish soil... failed... then insisted that we pay the bill for the whole escapade.

It is this part of the narrative of the past six/seven years that Fianna Fáil has failed to develop, perhaps thanks to the understandable fear that no one really wants to hear its side of the story.

Before concluding I should admit a vested interest.

Though I have referred to Fianna Fáil in the third party throughout this piece; I am no impartial observer. I am a Fianna Fáil-er and have been involved at a senior level for decades. I am involved in several local election campaigns in Dublin. I backed a candidate other than Mary Fitzpatrick for the Dublin nomination. I was mooted as a possible Director of Communications for the Dublin euro-campaign, though the idea was binned. I ran against Mary Hanafin twice... but came out the wrong side of the encounter.

That said, I think Micheal Martin has done a decent job. He has done well on phase one: halting the decline, but not so well on phase two – making Fianna Fáil a party capable of governing.

The parallels with the party's biggest political achievement of recent decades: The Good Friday Agreement, are significant.

While reaching that Agreement was a mammoth task that sometimes seemed impossible, looking back this part of the process was as nothing when compared to the difficulties in implementing it and making those institutions work.

So it is with phase two of Fianna Fáil's recovery.

There is still a long way to go – and the leadership needs to look far beyond its own limited circle for the skills and energy to see it through.

ENDS

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