

By Election Article

On a very low turnout in the long run up to an election, a seasoned cynic would say that the outcome of this week's by-elections has little or no long term significance. And the cynic might be right. After all, nobody was voting on Friday to elect a government

But I think that there is a message here. The governing Coalition parties have taken another "wallop" at the hands of a jaded, austerity-weary electorate, between them getting less than a quarter of the vote in Roscommon and less than a fifth of the vote in Dublin South West.

The Fine Gael and Labour parties won two-thirds of the seats in Dail Eireann last time out. They now enjoy the support of only one third of voters according to the latest IPSOS-MRBI opinion poll. Unless there is a dramatic change in voter sentiment in the next twelve months, there is no chance that the present Government will be re-elected in the coming general election.

So it is not merely a case of Government supporters staying home on Friday. The tide is running strongly in the wrong direction. Fine Gael and Labour, who ran good candidates, should each feel separately devastated by the outcomes. Nobody came out to express gratitude for the economic recovery.

The news is equally bleak for Fianna Fail. They too got less than a quarter of the vote in Roscommon and less than a tenth of the vote in Dublin South West.

Sinn Fein did well, but not nearly as well as they themselves had hoped. They ended the day empty-handed.

Who would have believed that Fine Gael, Fianna Fail and Labour would combined together be reduced to one vote in four in a Dublin constituency!

A political landscape akin to Ground Zero has emerged as the dust clouds settled.

Maybe the coming Carlow-Kilkenny by-election will be less of a shock. But it is hard not to feel that the political tectonic plates are shifting and that we may soon be in for an earthquake that could break the Irish political Richter Scale.

By the way, we will be voting quite soon to elect a new government. The way things are going, we are in for a period of major political uncertainty and change.

Even the pundits who foresee a Grand Coalition of FG and FF might reflect on the fact that the parties to that putative coalition together mustered just 17% of first preferences in Dublin South West and 37% in Roscommon.

I think Middle-Ireland wants something new.

I wonder whether some of the component parts are to really be found in in the hesitant political outsiders lining the backbenches in the present Dail, some of whom seem to think, like Mr Micawber,

that something “will simply turn” up to put them into a ram-shackle ad-hoc governing coalition after the next election.

Let’s give some exercise to a few clichés.

These results show there is a “gap in the market”. It is widening. Is there a “market in the gap”? I think so.

Another cliché (from Roy Keane, I think): “Fail to Prepare, Prepare to Fail”.

And a third cliché: “Fortune Favours The Brave”.

From the Latin: *Fortuna Favet Fortibus* which Myles na Gopaleen famously said was the answer to the question: “Which is Dublin’s best-augured bus route?”

It seems to me that the potential is there for a movement which could deliver twenty or twenty five TDS in the next Dail - politically reformist, socially liberal and economically pro-enterprise - which could be the dynamic component in our next government. This week Murphy and Fitzmaurice proved that the exchequer-subsidised, cash rich political parties are no match for those with determination to succeed.

That is the opportunity which exists in an otherwise bleak political landscape.