

Micheál Martin's Dilemma

The Fianna Fáil party is facing a difficult election. Opinion polls consistently suggest that it is attracting similar levels of support to those for Sinn Féin and it seems that it can expect to receive between 18% and 24% of the first preference vote. My hunch is that they will do creditably outside Dublin and that the larger turn out by older voters will help them. That should yield between 32 and 34 seats.

The problem with achieving that kind of outcome is that very few now believe that Micheál Martin will be the next Taoiseach – the working assumption is that Enda Kenny will be Taoiseach when the new Dáil is elected. As Michael Noonan and FG found in 2002, there is nothing as marginalising in politics as the widespread belief that voting for a party will make no difference. Political irrelevance is lethal to a party's prospects.

Micheál has a huge dilemma. He must somehow demonstrate that a vote for FF is not a wasted vote; but he dares not explicitly hint that he would coalesce with FG. That prospect is very unpalatable to the traditional FF vote and the dissatisfied voter. But the possibility that FF and SF might coalesce is very damaging too. And no-one believes that FF and Labour could form a government, either on their own or with others.

So his tactic in the next few weeks will simply be to avoid the issue of coalition altogether and to concentrate on maximising the FF vote in the same way as FF quietly achieved 25% support in the last local elections. His mantra will be that he will address the future role for FF “when the votes are counted”.

Micheál also knows that there will be a likely challenge to his leadership if FF are not going into government after the election. That means that if FG and Labour manage to hang on to government – with or without outside support – his leadership and his personal career could well end in a matter of weeks.

On the other hand, if the present coalition fails to secure re-election, the personal choice for Micheál could be a choice between political oblivion and forming a coalition with Enda “in the national interest”.

If FF gets 34 seats, FG gets 58 or 60, and Labour has 11, Micheál could credibly ask Enda for 6 seats in Cabinet, 6 junior ministers, 3 committee chairmanships, sundry other jobs, and 4 out of the 11 Taoiseach's nominations to the Seanad. That would nearly fix up half the parliamentary party with positions of power. Would they forsake that “bird in the hand” for another 5 years of opposition?

From Enda's point of view, that deal could be seen to “end Civil War politics”, allow him serve 8 years as Taoiseach (a first for FG), and have a comfortable majority - not only in the Dail but also in the Seanad (as things stand, an FG -Labour coalition will not be able to control the next Seanad even with 11 Taoiseach's nominees because of poor local election results).

Such a deal would also pitch Labour and Sinn Féin into opposition - and into a violent struggle for leadership of the Left with other elements of the Hard Left.

And if FF could then wait for a suitable opportunity to exit coalition with FG on a point of principle, they might not suffer the usual fate of junior coalition partners.

All of which suggests to me that Mícheál Martin will want to keep his options open while publicly disavowing any specific coalition scenarios. But it won't be easy to do so while remaining politically relevant.

Enda's obvious ploy is to ask for voter support on the same basis that David Cameron did so successfully – "It's me or chaos" and "Don't risk letting Sinn Féin into Government". Has he yet fielded enough candidates to secure an overall majority with a "Cameron swing"? I doubt it.

Once it becomes clearly and widely understood that Enda Kenny will be the next Taoiseach, there may well be a lower turn out. The "protest vote" may stay at home. Younger voters may stay away as well. Its not just a question of "how many vote?" it's a question of "who votes?".

Punters have been favouring a FG-FF coalition even if opinion polls are less enthusiastic about the prospect. More money is now backing Mícheál than Joan for Tánaiste.

While it's "early days" still in the election campaign, the punters may turn out to be "on the money".