

New Party Article

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The polls published this weekend must be treated cautiously in that they relate to an immediate political context which is not that of a general election. Extrapolating from them carries risks. For one thing the pollsters make the positive effort to approach the voters polled; the sad likelihood is that the majority of Irish voters will probably stay away from the polling stations on the day of the local and European elections. Those who will not bother voting on the day may well have quite different attitudes from those who actually will go out to vote.

But even people who do bother to vote at local, European and bye elections feel that it is an opportunity to be freer with their votes, and that the consequences of “sending a message” is radically different from a vote in a General Election.

By the same token, some politicians will hope against hope that these polls are wrong. I did so myself in the context of the Seanad referendum where I was getting a very different message on the doorstep in the weeks running up to that defeat for the Government’s abolition stunt. Likewise, the last time I was elected, a 2002 Prime Time constituency poll gave me no chance about eight weeks before I topped the poll.

Whatever happens in May, we are now in the run-in to the next general election. These are not mid-term elections. The Government has run 60% of its maximum possible life. Pretty soon the passengers will feel the under-carriage deployed. Some politicians – particularly Labour – worried about a crash-landing are wondering whether the under-carriage will deploy at all. And with reason, I think.

Today’s poll shows an all-time high level of support in recent times for the formation of a new party. Support for forming a new party had noticeably dipped to 37% in January in the immediate anti-climactic aftermath of the Monster Meeting of the Reform Alliance.

But, a few months later, faced as we are with a dazzling array of candidates, posters and elections, more than half the voters, right across the various social and geographical spectrums, say they want a new party. 54% say they are hugely unhappy at the choices they are being offered. The gap in the market is widening.

In the wake of recent events, all polls indicate that there is at present little likelihood of the FG/Labour coalition being re-elected. The “post Troika-exit” afterglow is gone. The parties who have two thirds of the seats have one third of voter support.

If Sinn Fein pulls well ahead of Labour, the “left” vote will simply deliver SF seats on the strength of transfers from eliminated Labour candidates right across the country. Nor is there any real prospect of an over-all FG majority; on the contrary FG seem set to lose a good number of seats. Labour is in serious,

very serious difficulty and a principled exit from government may seem like their only option to stay alive. The Labour hierarchy will see it differently, of course.

On present form, an FF/SF coalition, once only a twinkle in Eamon O Cuiv's eye, is becoming a very real possibility. If FF are faced with an FG coalition option (which spells death for the minority partner) or an SF alliance, then the choice becomes very stark indeed. And their "core values" on coalition will be put to the same test as Charlie Haughey faced in 1989.

The problem facing Middle Ireland is that a vote for FF or FG is a complete gamble on who will support either of them in government.

Some people feel that a loose group of say 10 reasonably like-minded independents will hold the effective balance of power with FG after the next election, and some suggest that they might even demand a presence in cabinet as the price of their semi-organised support. But that scenario which might emerge by voting accident would be a very difficult "sell" on the doorsteps pre-election.

I have written here that the local and European elections must go by before the circumstances are right for a new initiative in national politics. The novelty value of a new party would have been dissipated completely if it had contested either local or European polls simply because it could make no difference to Ireland or to Europe for that matter. Councils have little or no effect on national politics; winning 3 seats at Strasbourg would be without consequence too.

In 2002, the outcome of the election was significantly affected by the "One Party Government, No Thanks" move by the PDs. Michael Noonan's FG were completely marginalised in that election by irrelevance in terms of a choice for government. A "market was made" in the "gap" for the PDs.

There is an opportunity now to make a "market in the gap". The gap is growing. The market for the votes of reformist Middle Ireland is there. The appetite is there. It can be filled.

Of course not all of the 54% of people who want a new party will wish for the same kind of party. Some of them may well be "People Before Profit" supporters who don't know that they already have a new party. Others may be disgruntled Pro-Life supporters who want the next government to reverse the Protection of Life Act. But if half of the 54% are from Middle Ireland, their voice can be heard.

A credible new party focussed on reformist Middle Ireland could capture 15 to 20 seats with 15% support in the next election. (The PDs got 14 seats with 12% in 1987). That would deliver the balance of power in present circumstances. So even if less than a third of those who want a new party now are given the chance to vote for it, they will decide what kind of government we will have after the next general election.

A final point. The political establishment has raised the bar for any new party. FG, as a political party, receives €4.8 million each year from the Exchequer. That is €22 million over the life of the Dail! The other Dail parties receive similar funding depending on their size. But none of the millions that Labour will receive will save their skins on election day. You may well wonder at the well-oiled machines. But votes, not money will talk on election day.

A new party is not for the faint-hearted. Or for the naïve. Money is not the issue either, as the successful Democracy Matters referendum campaign recently demonstrated. It's a matter of citizens' will-power, belief, judgement, policies, and courage. And patriotism.