

OBITUARY FOR SINN FEIN?

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

The results of the local and European elections on 23 May 2019 are a disappointment for Sinn Féin but, despite the gloating of hostile elements in the media, they are by no means a disaster. Mark Twain once said about a premature obituary of him: reports of my death are greatly exaggerated. One might paraphrase here by stating that reports of the imminent demise of Sinn Féin are somewhat optimistic. When one keeps a cool head in analysing the data, proportionate conclusions paint a different picture.

First of all, the turnout for these elections was typically low at around 50%. Secondly, people are aware that they are electing candidates who have very little power at either level concerned.

There is thus all the difference in the world between a local or European election and a general election insofar as people know fully well that they are not electing a new government. The elections in question consequently provide an opportunity for protest votes and can be useful in that respect in providing an outline of the concerns of the electorate. However, the last opinion polls on the question of a general election have still to be kept firmly in mind when assessing where we are at as regards underlying party support.

Everybody has agreed that the outstanding feature of the recent elections was the support recorded for the Greens. This can be seen as both a simple protest vote and the expression of a genuine concern about a fundamental issue for the whole of humanity vis-à-vis climate change.



It was probably particularly influenced by international reports of late which forcefully highlight the seriousness of the situation and it was further brought home in a very direct way by the demonstrations in this and other countries by the school-going population. However, it would be facile to thus assume that the Green Party will maintain the same level of support in a general election, especially because that leads to government formation and requires policies on more than climate change. Nonetheless, the impact on the next general election will surely have to be that all parties address much more seriously the question of

climate change, and that is a good thing.

When all the data is then taken into account, the position is that the three largest parties remain as FG, FF and SF. In the local elections, Sinn Féin (at 10%) is four points ahead of both the Labour Party and the Green Party. In the European election, it is ahead (at 12%) of the Labour Party by nine points and the Green Party by one point.

In 2011, the structure of Irish politics was radically altered whereby Fine Gael became the largest party, followed by Fianna Fáil and followed again not far behind by Sinn Féin. In the latter instance, this involved the displacement of the Labour Party in the context of the landscape transforming from one principally consisting of 2 1/2 parties to one mainly being constituted by 3 parties of near to equivalent size. We now also have the state of affairs whereby the conservative parties (Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil) make up about 50% of the electorate whereas for most of the post-war period they could claim around 70%. By now, this overall structure appears to have become definitely established. As for the last opinion poll about a general election, which was taken just before the May 23 elections, SF was recorded as having up to 19%.

When all is said and done, therefore, there is no reason to believe that Sinn Féin has suffered an underlying permanent reverse.

For the Left in general, the most significant question that seems to have been missed as regards these elections is why conservatism (i.e. FG & FF) remains so strong in Ireland at around 50% of the electorate (and more if some Independents are counted), even if the figure has declined from around 70% in most of the post-war period. Contemplation of that fact is of more relevance than a possibly temporary setback for Sinn Féin.

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