



CNI

PRESS WATCH - Getting ready to be governed by Sinn Fein in the Republic

Politics is a strange business. One word and one man's name that were almost entirely unknown a few years ago now look as if they are going to change modern Irish politics and history: they are 'Brexit' and 'Maurice McCabe' writes Andy Pollak.

The British exit from the EU is the new and deeply unsettling reality that will dominate the politics and economics of this island, north and south, for many years to come. And more immediately, the ramifications of the nauseating campaign by senior echelons of the Garda Siochana to destroy the life and career of an honest, whistle-blowing police sergeant (if this turns out to be true), which will soon end the long career of the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, bring us closer than ever before to a mould-breaking general election in the Republic.

The breaking of the mould, I believe, will be the entry for the first time of Sinn Féin into government in the Republic as a minority partner. Mary Lou McDonald, the favourite to succeed Gerry Adams as leader of the party in the South, has said it is now open to this option. And the electoral arithmetic points to a Fianna Fáil-Sinn Féin coalition as the most likely outcome of an election in the near future. Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin has so far set his face against such an outcome, determined that an alliance with Sinn Féin would not see his constitutional republican party suffer the same fate as the SDLP in the North. But if Sinn Féin sources are right, and the next election sees Fianna Fáil winning around 55 seats (compared to 44 now) and Sinn Féin around 30 (compared to 23 now), this shrewd and pragmatic politician – knowing that the numbers won't add up to a coalition with Labour or the Independents, and that his membership won't allow him to coalesce with Fine Gael – will almost certainly have to hold his nose and go into government with the former political wing of the Provisional IRA.

Sinn Féin now has the smartest electoral machine in the Republic. It has some of the smartest, youngest, brightest and most hardworking candidates. The disillusion with parliamentary politics that has seen the decline

of left-of-centre parties throughout Europe has not affected Sinn Féin. Since the 2011 election its star has been in the ascendant, with 2014 in particular seeing it pick up three European Parliament seats and treble the number of its local councillors. It was slightly disappointed at last year's election results, but it still increased its number of Dail seats from 14 in 2011 and a mere four in 2007. There is no reason to believe that after a year of faltering coalition between Fine Gael and Independents, and with health, housing and water supply (that toxic issue) still in crisis, Sinn Féin won't continue to pick up votes. Ironically and unfairly the country's strong and continuing economic recovery, which Fine Gael can take most credit for, will probably not be a determining factor, just as it wasn't in last year's election.

The main barrier to increasing Sinn Féin's vote in the Republic is its leader, Gerry Adams. The old warlord is deeply distrusted by large sections of the Southern electorate, particularly in more middle-class areas. Party insiders say Mary Lou McDonald will take over sooner rather than later. And with Michelle O'Neill's unexpected coronation in the North, it is easy to see where Sinn Féin is positioning itself: as a young, idealistic party headed by two women and largely rid of its paramilitary past, which is eager

to be in government in both Irish jurisdictions. And it will certainly make it more attractive to a wider constituency: a retired senior Dublin banker told me recently that if Adams was gone he would consider voting Sinn Fein for the first time.

In the North they will eventually have to go back into deeply uncomfortable coalition with what they hope will be a DUP weakened by the Renewable Heat Initiative scandal and other corruption allegations. The prize then for Sinn Fein is that their ministers on both sides of the border will be able to meet in the North South Ministerial Council and portray it as some form of united Irish administration in embryo, while pressuring Micheál Martin to take a more aggressive line with the British over a Border Poll and other supposed steps towards unity.

The DUP only have themselves to blame if they find that rather than dealing with Enda Kenny and Martin McGuinness – both strong believers in reaching out to unionists – they are in future facing the much tougher combination of a Fianna Fail-Sinn Fein coalition in Dublin (although Micheál Martin will wish to continue reaching out) and a harder line leadership of the untried Michelle O'Neill with Adams pulling the strings in the North. Sinn Fein is thinking of a

return to a 'pan-nationalist front' along the lines of the Albert Reynolds/ John Hume/Gerry Adams tie-up in the early 1990s. And if there is one thing the unionists are right about it is that Adams, along with the likes of Conor Murphy, Gerry Kelly and Declan Kearney, will continue to be the power behind the republican throne in Northern Ireland.

Readers of this column will know that I am no fan of Sinn Fein. But I am a believer in facing up to reality and trying to make the best of it, unlike too many unionists, who often seem like the Bourbon monarchs of old: learning nothing and forgetting nothing (or perhaps that should be forgiving nothing). As the late great historian of modern Europe Tony Judt used to say, probably misquoting John Maynard Keynes: 'When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?'

Meanwhile hanging like a very dark and large cloud over all these political proceedings will be the likelihood of a hard Brexit. This is the real game changer for Ireland, north and south. And it is likely that it will be played out in an increasingly all-island arena. Already the main forum for discussing this existential issue is the Irish government-convened All-Island Civic Dialogue on Brexit, which has no equivalent in

the North and which is attended by the Alliance Party and most significant northern business, farming and civil society bodies (this is surely the North-South Consultative Forum promised by the Good Friday and St Andrews Agreements, but never delivered, in another shape). It is striking how often these days our very un-republican Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, cites the need for the island to deal together with the common threat posed by Brexit. “We will seek all-island solutions to our many challenges,” he said in his opening address to the second Civic Dialogue on Brexit conference in Dublin on 17th February. At the same event the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Charlie Flanagan, stressed the “right of the people of Northern Ireland to be Irish and therefore to be EU citizens.” The chair of the NI Community Relations Council, Peter Osborne, warned that if “a pole with a camera on it” was erected as part of a new Irish customs border, it would inevitably become a target for dissident republicans.

This is what terrifies Sinn Féin and makes them increase the volume of their all-Ireland rhetoric. Senior republicans are genuinely worried that young northern nationalists, in particular, will accuse them of betraying a Good Friday Agreement which promised (and delivered) a very significant lowering of the border, but which

is now being overruled by a Brexit vote by the people of the UK (but not of the people of Northern Ireland). In these circumstances, the potential for dissidents to attract such young people is considerable, and some argue that it is already happening in places like Derry. The threat of Brexit to the peace process is not negligible.

I haven't even mentioned the threat posed to the Union by another probable vote on Scottish independence. But whether unionists with their narrow vision like it or not, much of post-Brexit politics is likely to be played on an all-Ireland pitch. I fear that the economic impact of a hard Brexit on a low-productivity economy like Northern Ireland's, which will be losing its nearest and most vital tariff-free export market across the border, will be very damaging. Meanwhile the forces arguing for Irish unity in the South, largely dormant in recent years as the institutions set up by the Good Friday Agreement focused successfully on low-key North-South cooperation for mutual benefit, will certainly see a comeback if Sinn Féin go into government. Southern Sinn Féiners are full of optimism, citing the "clear and present danger" of Brexit as a reason for Irish people to come together. It would be an extreme irony if a vote by the British people that completely ignored

Ireland does more to push Northern Ireland in the direction of Irish unity than 30 years of killing and bombing by the IRA.

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a blog by Andy Pollak

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