



John Cummins

CAN 36-YEAR-OLD senator John Cummins win back a seat for Fine Gael in Waterford, after the party's wipe-out there in 2020. Heavy transfers from a phenomenal performance from Sinn Féin's David Cullinane saw the Green Party's Marc Ó Cathasaigh and Independent Matt Shanahan leapfrog two FG candidates and edge the party out.

FG is leading its Fianna Fáil rivals in the opinion polls and outscored it 24% to 15% in the recent local elections in Waterford. This has given it the confidence that it can outpoll FF's Mary Butler and win back the seat last held by FG in 2016 by John Deasy.

In 2020, FG scored 16.5% first preferences between Waterford City-based Cummins and Dungarvan-based Damien Geoghegan, but the bitter feuding between rival FG factions – inherited from the days of Deasy and former junior minister Paudie Coffey – saw Geoghegan transfer less than half of his votes to his FG 'colleague' on the final decisive count.

This feud is not as virulent as it was in the heady days of 2016 (when Deasy saw off Coffey to take FG's Waterford seat) but it's still a factor.

Given the failure of their two-candidate strategy in 2020, FG decided to nominate only one candidate, Cummins, at its selection convention when Declan Doocey, a former deputy mayor of Waterford and strident critic of the Greens, withdrew his candidacy at the last minute.

More to the point, Geoghegan, who topped the local election poll in Dungarvan, did not stand "in a gesture of unity" but no one expects too much commitment to the campaign from him or his supporters.

Geoghegan was only 300 votes behind Cummins in 2020 but head office made clear its preference for Cummins, despite Geoghegan's local election performance, and Taoiseach Simon Harris gave Cummins a ringing endorsement after his selection, saying: "I am delighted that John Cummins has been selected by members to run in the constituency of Waterford."

"John and I were both members of Young Fine Gael together and were elected to our respective councils in 2009. In that time, John has proven himself to be an exceptional public representative."

"While we take nothing for granted, I believe a dynamic, diligent and enthusiastic candidate like John is well positioned to win back a Dáil seat for Fine Gael in the Waterford constituency."

FG, of course, has another problem, namely meeting the gender quota of 40% women candidates, and it is possible that, despite announcing a one-candidate strategy, the party may add a token woman candidate to the list. Niamh O'Donovan, who took Doocey's Lismore council seat, is the most likely.

Such an addition, of course, would add to Geoghegan's angst.

Cummins is buoyed up by his family

pedigree and by a sense that the wind is behind the party's sails in this constituency following its local election triumph.

But there is no easy ride ahead. In 2020, SF's Cullinane scored 38.3% of first preferences, barely under two quotas. But without a running mate his surplus went to elect a Green and an Independent. Even if SF shed as much as 6% of its first-preference vote, it is still well placed to take two seats. In the locals, however, the party only scored 21% but everyone expects it to do far better than that in a general election.



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In addition, SF has a good geographical spread, with Cullinane based in Waterford City in the east and Conor McGuinness, the party's standard bearer, from Dungarvan in the west.

With no Dungarvan candidate this time, FG might well feel the pinch.

Furthermore, FF's Mary Butler is based in Dungarvan and can be expected to pick up many party votes that might otherwise go to FG. She will, however, also feel the impact of SF's Conor McGuinness, who is likewise Dungarvan based, and given FG's strong showing in the locals, it seems that she will have a major fight on her hands to keep her seat.

With both SF and FG angling to win seats in this four-seater, there are three potential losers: Ó Cathasaigh of the Greens, Independent Shanahan and FF's Butler.

The Green wave that saw Ó Cathasaigh take a seat in 2020 (with SF help) has dissipated – in the locals, the Green vote

dipped to 4%, behind even the now-weakened Labour Party.

There is little prospect of there being a Green revival so Ó Cathasaigh is regarded as a favoured candidate for the drop.

Shanahan, too, benefited from SF transfers, which will not be forthcoming in the next election, but Independents in general are doing very well in Waterford and in the rest of the country.

In the locals, Independents scored 29% first preferences but it is hard to see Shanahan (who scored 8% in 2020) getting much more than 10% or half a quota. With few transfers coming his way, he looks to be weaker than Butler.

Shanahan, who was elected on campaigns to save the local hospital and to make Waterford DIT a university, is a professional market consultant and took a significant chunk of votes from FG in 2020. With a stronger FG campaign in his native Waterford City, Shanahan might find it difficult to repeat the trick.

One of his main campaign planks, the setting up of a Waterford university, has now been done with the establishment of the South East Technological University in Waterford, Wexford and Carlow. But it is FG that is getting the credit for that as it was Simon Harris, then the higher education minister, who set up the institution in 2022.

Furthermore, Waterford traditionally had two TDs from the east and two from the west – although in 2020 it was three east and only one west. With Cullinane and Cummins well placed in the east, and McGuinness in the west, Shanahan's base looks weaker and the odds favour Butler to edge him out in the final shake-out.

In the next election, Cullinane's personal vote will be well down but he will still poll ahead of party colleague McGuinness and is assured of a seat.

As a single FG candidate (or even one with a token female running mate) Cummins should easily outpoll Shanahan, leaving the marketing consultant fighting for survival.

It all comes back to how well Butler does in the west. In the locals in Dungarvan, FG actually outpollled FF by about three to one (another source of grievance for Geoghegan, for whom a two-candidate strategy would have made coherent sense whatever happened in 2020). But with no FG runner there, Butler should reap the benefit.

She won't hit Cummins's vote but should scrape through herself.

All of this is good news for Cummins, who looks set to do what his father, Maurice Cummins, never did and win a seat in the Dáil.