



Keira Keogh

Guaranteeing the succession is always a fraught task in politics but 37-year-old Keira Keogh managed to climb back from a poor local election outing to hold Michael Ring's Fine Gael seat in West Mayo at the general election.

FG has had a strong grip on this constituency since the watershed election of 2011, when Fianna Fáil collapsed and FG took four of the five seats on offer. But Ring's retirement and the failure of former TD Michelle Mulherin to regain any momentum posed a big question about the party's chances and who could do it for them.

FG was confident that Castlebar-based Alan Dillon would hold his seat and indeed he did as FG took a commanding 35% of the first-preference vote. FG put up four candidates – spreading its chances – in what had been restored as a five-seat constituency but it had to dig deep to find candidates.

Independent councillor Mark Duffy from Ballina was persuaded to join FG just before the general election and was added to the ticket by party HQ, joining Dillon, Keogh and Martina Jennings from the south of the county.

Ring enthusiastically championed Keogh in Westport and pulled out all the stops to ensure that she put up a major challenge.

In the event, Keogh was third placed of the FG candidates but was only 200 votes behind Ballina's Duffy. She overtook him on transfers, with the elimination of the Green and People before Profit candidates, and never looked back.

Duffy, however, remains a favourite for FG. He got a party nomination for the Seanad and won a seat on the labour panel. As a well-regarded community activist, his presence in the Oireachtas will keep Keogh on her toes.

Keogh's family have been associated with Ring for many years but Keira herself has little political experience. FG's electoral blurb describes her as "a proud Mayo woman who grew up immersed in the hospitality industry at The Helm in Westport Quay, which instilled in her a strong work ethic and community spirit".

The blurb continues: "A passionate and dedicated behaviour consultant, Keira has 18 years of experience working with neurodiverse children."

Keogh was chosen to chair the Oireachtas children and equality committee – probably on the basis of her work with children rather than her being immersed in a pub – but has already taken a semi-independent line, insisting publicly that the annual report of the children's ombudsman is a "roadmap for action" not talking.

"This report is a sobering read," she said. "As a TD – and someone whose career prior to politics was centred around children – I find it shameful to see how so many of our children have been failed."

Ring, of course, was very much his own man and only toed the party line when it accorded with his own views. Keogh seems to understand that she too needs to make sure that the electorate considers her in a similar light if she is to fend off the challenge from Duffy.

Duffy's weakness is that Ballina's strong man is FF's Dara Calleary. The latter always had the edge over Castlebar's Lisa Chambers, a Micheál Martin favourite, who has now retired from politics following yet another defeat in last year's election.



Keira Keogh

Calleary's stock has risen in FF as he has rolled up his sleeves and got to work in his ministerial briefs in social protection, rural and community development, and the Gaeltacht.

A committed Irish-speaker, Calleary has gone down well with language activists and he hopes that this will stand to his credit when debate resumes about future party leadership.

He has Ballina sown up – a problem for Duffy – but Calleary's big problem is to find a running mate who can get elected without damaging his own vote.

In 2024, FF scored 20% first preferences, enough for one seat but nowhere near the mark for two. This vote was a small drop on the 24% FF scored in 2020 and on the 27% it scored in 2016.

FG, however, has been declining as well and Sinn Féin – so far – has been unable to get much above 20%.

In a five-seater, on current percentages, FG will take two, FF and SF will take one each,

with one other up for grabs. In 2024, Aontú's Paul Lawless took the last seat, just ahead of former FG but now Independent Patsy O'Brien.

In 2020 O'Brien, from Claremorris, was expelled from FG after a party inquiry found that he had sent pornographic material to a female party worker but it was noted that, when FG's Jennings (also from Claremorris) was eliminated, the largest share of her transfers went to O'Brien.

Lawless scored 6% first preferences but is clearly vulnerable to any SF resurgence if the party was able to get back to earlier opinion poll ratings.

SF's second candidate, Swinford councillor Gerry Murray, is very well liked but the party just didn't have the support to put it in with a chance of two seats.

Murray is very much a party man for whom the best interest of the party is more important than what's best for him personally. He is solidly supportive of successful SF TD Rose Conway-Walsh.

Interestingly, although Murray is a left-wing, social progressive, his transfers went mainly to Aontú – almost certainly because of its nationalism rather than its anti-immigration stance.

Aontú's Lawless did draw in an anti-immigration vote but his base remained the more traditional republican one that Aontú generally appeals to. If SF got the edge on Aontú in the next election – Murray was 800 votes behind Lawless in 2024 – the latter's transfers would be more likely to go to SF than to anyone else. But SF would have to up its game considerably to be able to challenge for two seats.

O'Brien's vote, of course, is mainly an FG one and although his return to the FG fold looks very, very unlikely, it can't be ruled out. If he were to return, he would pose a challenge not only to Lawless but to Keogh as well.

Keogh was 600 votes ahead of O'Brien on first preferences but she was decidedly more transfer-friendly. She looks to have his measure but will need to watch out for the challenge from Duffy.

Her position as chair of the Oireachtas children and equality committee gives her the basis to enhance her profile – and indications are already there that she intends to use it for that end – but Duffy is an energetic campaigner and he can be expected to use his position on the Oireachtas transport committee to highlight the many complaints that Mayo voters have concerning transport and road connections in the county.

The next election may be some years away but it's battle on already in Mayo.