

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION



**MARTIN GOADS
JIM O'CALLAGHAN**

THE POLLS that followed the upheaval in Fianna Fáil over the botched Jim Gavin presidential campaign may indicate a lull in the party's in-fighting but the comments from interested parties say much more than most media analysis suggests.

For a start, Gerard Howlin, a former advisor to Bertie Ahern as taoiseach, cut through the media consensus that Micheál Martin was preparing for a graceful retirement



Micheál Martin

after his term as president of the EU Council in the second half of this year. The ever-so-sensible view is that a leader must never give a date for retirement without immediately and effectively jettisoning all power. But this is not a cast iron rule and Howlin's opinion that Martin will not willingly relinquish a single day in his role of Taoiseach trumps the sensible view in many people's minds.

The second source of wisdom when it comes to Martin's intentions recently has been *Irish Times* political editor Pat Leahy, who has offered two interesting observations since the parliamentary party's pre-Christmas brawling.

The first, which is merely a defence against the leader's critics, says that upheavals in FF are bad not only for the country but for the party itself (one is unsure of the primacy of either of these casualties). It is also an argument that has been pushed by Martin himself and Leahy went through the travails of Squire Hockey, Albert Reynolds and other FF leaders to illustrate his point.

But it is Leahy's second and quite startling argument, made a few days before Christmas,

that was most arresting. Ironically, after listing the examples above of the negative consequences of such internal strife, he suggested that a "decisive showdown" of the interested leadership candidates might be best for everyone.

There are few in Leinster House who did not interpret this remark as anything but Leahy reporting the off-record thoughts of Martin's leadership team – or some of them – as a taunt of the prime leadership contender, Jim O'Callaghan, in the mould of a Cork hurler slapping it up to the Tipperary team.

More significantly, Martin's *Sunday Independent* interview last weekend – in particular his stated intention of leading FF into the next general election – was regarded in the same way by party TDs and others.

Martin's team are feeling more bullish after the latest poll, not necessarily the most

perceptive analysis given the voters' strong dissatisfaction with Government and a majority saying Martin should step down as leader.



Jim O'Callaghan

Party leadership handlers, however, believe there is no united majority in favour of a heave right now and that a contest – either via a confidence motion in Martin or

a challenger – would see Martin confirmed as leader.

If O'Callaghan fails to respond to this glove slapped across his face, then Martin's people will mutter in the ears of various TDs and journalists that Jim is not made of the right stuff.

At the same time, the virtually anonymous but very effective handler in Martin's team, Government press secretary Paul Clarkson, has reinvented the fast-talking Martin as a considered, thoughtful and mature statesman, who does not shoot his mouth off or make much noise, preferring instead to analyse situations and crises before responding. That's one of the repetitive messages from his *Síndó* interview, as is the deliberate comparison with the unnamed *Tánaiste*, Simon Harris.

There is another, longer-term consideration for O'Callaghan and his supporters, namely that by the time the EU presidency is over O'Callaghan will be in his early 60s. The justice minister is a fit and able man and right now he is at the top of his game as a proactive minister with an agenda. He also compares

favourably with other potential contenders. But who knows what eager junior minister or backbencher will emerge as another contender in the next year or so?

The growing belief is that Martin's plan is to go to Washington and survive the experience, before returning to preside over FF's centenary as the leader *in situ*; not a good time for a leadership challenge. He will then endure possible torment in two pending by-elections before presiding over the EU presidency until the end of this year, before starting his final 12 months as Taoiseach. Things may get trickier after that but Howlin's prediction is at least as likely as any other – unless events, dear boy, intervene.

That, at any rate, is what the more astute FF members believe to be Martin's agenda. Sure, hasn't he spelled it out in any case?

**MARY LOU'S
BY-ELECTION ISSUE**

SINN FÉIN'S coup in landing Gillian Sherratt – the mother of nine-year old Harvey Morrison, who died after waiting years for a scoliosis operation – as its Dublin Central by-election candidate is not necessarily a done deal. The leadership leaked

the story to the *Sunday Times*, which said her nomination, according to "party sources... was just a matter of procedure". But SF conventions can be anything but merely procedural and, while she will



Janice Boylan

have the backing of party leader and local TD Mary Lou McDonald, Sherratt may find the convention a tricky business.

Local party reaction to the leadership decision from above is not one of universal acclaim. Specifically, Janice Boylan, a popular party councillor in the north inner city, has made it clear that she is standing against Sherratt at convention and last week she posted a video to members declaring her intention in a very determined style.

Well schooled in electioneering after 12 years in SF, Boylan listed the local issues that she has campaigned on – housing and rents in particular. She also made sure to remind members that she was from the "area I am proud to call home... this isn't just a constituency to me, it's where my family, my neighbours and the people I see every day live and work".

Warming to a very distinct theme about Dublin Central being her homestead (unlike yer wan), Boylan added: "For the past 12 years as a councillor, I stood side by side with you on the issues that matter... I am asking for the support of the Dublin Central membership and, when it goes to convention, I hope that the people I campaigned with for years will support me."

Mary Lou and party organisers believe they have laid the ground work for Sherratt's nomination, with the *ST* supplied with the



"Enough about Micheál Martin – let's watch the Winter Olympics."

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information that the, er, provisional candidate had enjoyed several meetings with Mary Lou. This, presumably was intended to assure party members that Sherratt was neither as wooden a personality on camera as that other Dub, Jim Gavin, nor a landlord that owed money to a disgruntled tenant.

One reason for parachuting Sherratt – an impressive woman, with a record of fighting for her child as well as a most worthwhile cause for many parents – into the by-election is that Boylan’s record as an activist is certainly impressive but her electoral record is patchy. She was elected as a councillor in 2024 on the 12th count and, as Mary Lou’s running mate at the general election, she went out early, coming 11th out of 13 candidates and polling just 1,257 on the first count.

The SF leadership believes the seat is theirs for the taking, but only if they have the right candidate and they don’t believe that Boylan is that candidate.

The convention will see Boylan, councillor Séamas McGrattan and Sherratt fighting it out for the nomination, with the latter likely to win.

SOC DEMS SNUB LABOUR

PERPETUAL PLEAS from politicians and pundits – with not the faintest appreciation of, or good will towards, social democratic policies – for the Social Democrats to combine with another party were heard again following the party’s recent conference.

There are three alliance or merger options for the Soc Dems to take, with the first one being unity with the party whose anti-social-democratic behaviour spawned them in the first place – Labour. But the centre-right politicians who insist that the Soc Dems are



“I see Dawn Farms’ new herd has arrived!”

really the same as Labour ideologically and should, therefore, unite with them, miss the point entirely. The very substantial difference between the two parties is that one of them (Labour) threw out social democratic principles via coalition with Fine Gael, while the other (Soc Dems) was founded on the principle that they would not entertain such a political route.

Even the pragmatic and simplistic argument that unity would double their seats (each party won 11 seats in 2024) is faulty as the Soc Dems are winning support precisely because they refuse to return to what voters regard as ‘sell-out’ Labour. To do so would actually be political suicide, not a doubling of their seat tally.

Also, as the Soc Dems go further ahead of Labour with each poll, creating an organisation and set of candidates greater than the last election, the next Dáil is likely to see

a quite different ratio of seats between the two parties.

Another putative alliance muttered of is that between Labour, the Soc Dems and the

Greens, and there is certainly a good deal of voting commonality between the three parties. But this brings the trio only a tiny bit further – that of Roderic O’Gorman’s one seat at present – than the first alliance mooted.

The third alliance choice, the left alliance, offers the prospect of much greater vote transfers and also the vision of a far more substantial political force to confront the present Government with. That it includes Sinn Féin, and raises the possibility of that party in government, is the main

reason for the perpetual cry from the centre-right for the centre-left to abandon the left alliance.

Holly Cairns *et al* know that shunning the left alliance for unity with Labour alone would be the kiss of death.



Holly Cairns

HAZEL CHU REFUSES TO GO AWAY

FORMER DUBLIN lord mayor and Green Party chair Hazel Chu may have allowed herself a moment of schadenfreude on her election as party deputy chair last month.

Chu defeated Louth councillor Marianne Butler by a two-to-one ratio but it was the support for Butler from three party senators in the last government that might have given Chu such momentary pleasure. When Hazel did a solo run in a Senate by-election in 2021, senators Pippa Hackett, Róisín Garvey and Pauline O’Reilly moved a motion at their parliamentary party requesting that Chu stand down as party chair for the duration of the by-election.

Party leader Eamon Ryan backed the motion, while deputy leader Catherine Martin defended Chu in a split that broadly reflected the divide between Ryan’s centre-right Greens and the social justice wing of the party.

Now Garvey has left the party and Hackett and O’Reilly have retreated somewhat, although all three gave support to Butler’s campaign, while O’Reilly – who is also a former chair of the Green Party – proposed Butler for the post.

More to the point is that the three are opposed to the party’s support for a left alliance, with O’Reilly going so far as to support Heather Humphreys against Catherine Connolly in the presidential election.

With the party out of power and having lost 11 of its 12 seats in the 2024 election, it



Hazel Chu



Pauline O’Reilly

is the more leftist members that have picked up the reins and are leading the rebuilding effort that is now in train.

Chu is one of these and Dublin Bay South (DBS), once a bastion of the Greens, will be witness to a determined electoral effort

again from this manically active politician to take the seat previously held by Ryan. The combined, unofficial voting pact that operates between the Greens, Labour and the Social Democrats – a sort of centre-left, middle-class version of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael – helped to elect Labour leader Ivana Bacik and the Soc Dems’ Eoin Hayes here in 2024.

An almost universal view is that Hayes is a one-term TD given his travails in this term, while Bacik will likely return unless disaster strikes Labour before or during the next election. With FF’s Jim O’Callaghan and FG’s James Geoghegan virtual certs to return, Chu will probably be fighting it out with Sinn Féin senator Chris Andrews (who lost his seat in 2024) for the remaining DBS seat at the next general election.

This would perhaps be a staging post along the way – a long way – of a revival for the Greens. The only problem for Chu and other ‘social justice’ type Greens is that such a renewal could also mean that the professional accountants, lawyers and other self-described ‘grown-up’ Greens would flood back into the party again. A return of FG on bikes, as they used to be called.