

COMMENT & ANALYSIS: Shades of green: Sinn Fein could give parties across the political spectrum a fright in tomorrow's Irish election, says Brendan O'Leary

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In Ireland's general election tomorrow three shades of green may burn bright. Fianna Fail, the establishment custodian of Irish nationalism, led by Bertie Ahern, is set for its best performance for 25 years. Riding the fading light from an extraordinary, decade-long boom, it seeks to return to office as the competent manager of the Celtic tiger, under the ticket of prosperity and peace - the latter negotiated through the 1998 Good Friday agreement.

The last simulated ballot-poll suggests Fianna Fail may win 51 per cent of first preference votes and more than 83 seats in the 166-member Dail Eireann, the Irish parliament.

The other three parties that have been in government in recent decades are fragmented and are running without official prospective coalition partners: Fine Gael; the Progressive Democrats, economic liberals and Fianna Fail's coalition partners for the last five years; and Labour. All will pay for going it alone. They are reduced to warning voters against a Fianna Fail majority government: that way, they claim, lies the damnation of corruption. This claim is problematic because the Progressive Democrats and Labour want to be Fianna Fail's next coalition partners - and because all the main parties, including Fine Gael, have had their own brushes with corruption. But the three also-rans keep their spirits up because the polls show most voters prefer a Fianna Fail coalition government.

The second green shade that may burn brightly is more cosmopolitan: the ecological Greens, with hands as clean as their preferred environment. The election has raised their profile, especially in the secular left- space vacated by a de-radicalised Labour. They may get 4 per cent of the first preference vote.

The darkest green shade with fair electoral prospects, and in which is there is most international interest, is represented by Sinn Fein, now the sole important all-island party and expected to produce its best general election performance in its modern guise.

Currently, it has one deputy, elected when the IRA was not on ceasefire. It is canvassing labour and republican themes particularly on behalf of an aptly named green paper to prepare for Irish unification.

Ulster unionists want Sinn Fein to fare poorly, to stave off its steady electoral growth in both parts of Ireland and to assure its constituents that Irish unification is a remote prospect.

The UK government would like Sinn Fein to do well, to cement the republican movement's transformation into a fully constitutional party, but not so well as to confirm unionists' worst fears and realign southern politics. The outgoing Irish government, more quietly, mostly holds the same view: indeed Fianna Fail has ruled out Sinn Fein as a coalition partner as long as the IRA remains in existence.

As the campaign has progressed Sinn Fein has risen in the polls, with its share hovering between 5 and 8 per cent of the intended first preference vote. Martin Ferris, one of its candidates and a former leading figure in the IRA, looks certain to win a seat in Kerry.

If Ireland had a standard European proportional representation party list-system we would have a better idea of how Sinn Fein would do. Similar poll figures would suggest that Sinn Fein would

win between 8 and 13 seats in Dail Eireann and be a kingmaker if Fianna Fail failed to win an overall majority.

But Ireland is one of the few countries to use the single transferable vote version of proportional representation. It operates in constituencies that return three, four or five members and to be certain of a seat a party's candidate in any location must command a quarter, a fifth or a sixth of the first preference vote respectively.

If candidates do not have such quotas, they must rely for victory on attracting the second and lower order preferences cast for other candidates. The high quotas work especially hard against smaller parties that repel other parties' voters.

If Sinn Fein won only three seats but on a relatively high overall vote share - say, 8 per cent - that would confirm that it remained an undesirable coalition partner and that the IRA's dissolution would have to proceed faster for the sake of the party's southern progress. This feasible scenario might cause difficulties for the Sinn Fein leadership.

By contrast, if the party's vote share and seat share were broadly proportional and relatively high (say, 8 per cent and 11 seats) that would be a major breakthrough and demonstrate wider legitimacy with other southern parties' voters. Sinn Fein would then be the third largest party in votes in Ireland as a whole.

The most likely outcome is mixed: Sinn Fein will do enough to frighten but not terrify unionists and enough to encourage its activists that it chose well in opting for politics without the Armalite. But the more dramatic scenarios cannot be excluded.

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