

OUR WORST PREFERENCE

Reforming the Electoral System



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Chapter Five

In the Heat of Battle

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5. In the Heat of Battle

Alternative Voting Systems

There's no question about it and nobody needs an opinion poll to verify it. The public don't want another election. The demand is for a strong government, a stable government, a national government. It all boils down to the same thing. The people want a majority government which will last. The problem is that the election results didn't turn out that way. Neither side, for the second time in seven months, won either an absolute majority of the votes or of the seats in Dáil Éireann.

In one sense we can't complain. Our electoral system is performing in exactly the way it was intended. It is producing a pretty good correlation between the votes cast for each party nationally and seats won in the Dáil. Since nobody gained an overall majority of the votes nobody has gained an overall majority of the seats. So we have a hung Dáil. Seven deputies hold the key to power; a minor party of three and a disparate group of four independents.

There's nothing new about this. Since Fianna Fáil came to power in 1932 there have been seventeen elections, including this one. In only seven have Fianna Fáil won an absolute majority of seats. That's contrary to what most

people think, perceiving Fianna Fáil as a “natural majority” party. They are not. They are easily the largest party, and have consistently been that, but one must distinguish between being the biggest and being a majority. They are not synonymous.

Out of the nine elections in which Fianna Fáil were returned as a minority party they actually formed a Government on no less than five occasions. In these cases they relied on a variety of support: Labour twice and independents the rest of the time. Four times, and four times only, were they unable to turn their minority of seats into a Government with outside help. And, of course, we still don’t know what’s going to happen on the 9th March.

The Fianna Fáil track record is simple. Seven outright wins as a majority, five times in government even though a minority party, four spells in opposition and one as yet undecided. So what’s wrong this time? There are a couple of factors which have made these last seven months unique. Firstly, this is the first time when an election held within a year of a previous one has failed to produce a decisive result. The precedents are 1927, 1933, 1938 and 1944. We have never had two successive indecisive results before. And people don’t like it.

Secondly, these last two general elections are the only ones so far fought on constituencies not arranged by the politicians themselves. The present boundaries were drawn up independently by an impartial Commission and this has had the effect of filtering out what might be called,

the “gerrymander factor”. In many ways this is the key to the “hung Dáil” situation and is best explained by going back to Fianna Fáil’s seven majority governments. Odd as it may seem they only won a majority of votes nationally on two of those occasions. On the other five, they got a “bonus” of seats, which ensured a majority in Dáil Éireann, simply by being the largest party, as well as being the party which had actually drawn up the constituency boundaries. That ‘bonus’ was, at times, as high as 6.5% and meant that Fianna Fáil got 6.5% more of the Dáil seats than their votes strictly entitled them to. In practical terms it meant they got an extra six to nine seats, enough to take them over the top.

But the independent commission has weakened the “bonus” factor to the extent that I estimate Fianna Fáil must in future win 48.5% of the votes in order to be certain of winning over 50% of the seats. At present, they are 1.25% short of that critical figure. Just how difficult it would be to reach that target can be gauged from the following chilling statistic: in seventeen outings they have only exceeded it on three occasions. From now on a majority Fianna Fáil Government will be the exception rather than the rule. The same is equally true of any Fine Gael/Labour Coalition.

The prospects are for a continuous series of minority governments, each dependent on small parties and independents - and each with a future as uncertain as an April day. If we want stable majority Government made up of one or more major parties then we must do one of two things. We either change the present alignment of

the major parties in the Dáil or we change the system of voting to produce majority Government out of minority parties. The most stable government theoretically possible at present is a Fianna Fáil/Fine Gael Coalition. It would have a majority of 144 seats. It would be something like the Grand coalitions in Germany and Austria which both worked well in terms of the problems they set out to solve.

The next most stable government would be a Fianna Fáil/Labour Coalition or a Fianna Fáil minority government supported by Labour, as happened in 1932 and 1937. It would have a majority of 26. Ironically, this year is the fiftieth anniversary of Labour bringing Fianna Fáil to power for the first time in 1932. There is no other stable government in sight bar a Fianna Fáil/Left Alliance, which is unlikely.

All of the above, while theoretically possible, are not yet within the gambit of political practicalities. That being the case, we had better steel ourselves for a succession of short-lived minority governments. That will have the undoubted effect of many people questioning an electoral system which produces such instability. But what could we put in place of our system of proportional representation?

Well for a start, the British 'first past the post' system has been twice rejected by way of referendum. And they may get rid of it anyway in the near future. That's out. There was an interesting variation on the British system put forward in the last PR referendum, the so-called Norton Amendment. This was the Australian method of

electing deputies from single member constituencies but using the simple transferable vote as at present. Without question this would produce a huge Fianna Fáil majority, giving them well over one hundred seats on present party strengths. Many people rightly felt this would be too high a price to pay for stability.

There are two other single member constituency systems in use: France and Germany. In France voters go to the polls and simply put an "X" opposite the candidate of their choice, as in Britain. Candidates who win more than 50% of the votes are elected. If, as is more likely, nobody wins a majority, then a play off is held a week later between the two candidates who got the most votes in the first round. This system is consciously designed to produce majority governments. It does; but at the expense of fairness to the minority parties.

The German system seems more attractive. Here half the Bundestag is elected in single member constituencies, as in Britain. But the other half is elected from party lists. In addition to the seats won in the constituencies each party is allocated a certain number of seats from their lists so that they finish up with the same percentage of seats in the Bundestag as their national percentage of the votes. If you get 50% of the votes you get 50% of the seats. In this way they remove the distorting effect of the British system. Neat and logical, typically German.

Except not quite. A party must get more than 4% of the national vote before it can be represented in Parliament.

On that basis, Sinn Féin the Workers Party would not have any seats at all in this Dáil.

The system is deliberately designed to keep out the minor parties, such as, in Germany, the communist parties. This results in the larger parties always getting a bonus of additional seats when they share out those seats which otherwise would have gone to splinter groups. If the German system were in use here the result of this month's election would have been: Fianna Fáil 84, Fine Gael 66 and Labour 16. That would have given a majority to Fianna Fáil, albeit a small one. But these days a majority is a majority.

Or we could go for the Swedish model, which would give the same overall result as the German system, but through a different route. In Sweden voters vote in multi-member constituencies much bigger than in Ireland but they vote for the party of their choice, not the candidate. This is the 'list system'.

Interestingly, it was used in all the member states for the 1979 European Parliament Elections, with the exception of the UK and Ireland. Its popularity is obviously increasing and inevitably it will be used here when a uniform voting system is employed in some future Euro-elections.

In our present circumstances the list system has two great attractions. If the 4% hurdle is invoked then the eventual result will nearly always produce a majority Government. But it will also produce a Government elected on the issues and not on the personalities of the local T.D.s.

All the evidence is that Irish voters overwhelmingly vote on the basis of personal popularity. The personality of the candidates predominates, not their policies. The multi-member constituency inevitably brings that about. The most intense competition now is not between parties but within parties. The bitterest rivals are candidates standing on the same ticket. Our memories are fresh. The examples are there. As Albert Reynolds said on election night: we had forty-one General Elections in forty-one constituencies. That was not the way it was supposed to be. In fact, the party system as we know it is breaking down under the stress of competition between party colleagues. It is time we gave the electoral system a long cool examination.

Don't forget we never chose the present voting system for ourselves. It was given to us by the British. The only other places to use it are Malta and Tasmania. Obviously, it is not universally popular. Is it time to consciously choose an alternative? Circumstances are dictating that the answer is "Yes".

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