



JUST SHORT: Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald celebrates at the RDS in Dublin in February 2020 during the Irish general election count  
PICTURE: Niall Carson/PA

# Irish government parties playing the long game

**T**HE saying that "a week is a long time in politics" is commonly attributed to the late Harold Wilson and, if the former British prime minister (remember when Labour used to get that job?) was right, then three years and eight months must be close to an eternity.

That's how long it might be until the next general election in the Republic of Ireland, which could be held as late as February 2025. It's true that Dáil Éireann could be dissolved at an earlier stage, but there is no indication of that at present.

Supporters of the current government of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Greens would presumably prefer to put off the Dáil dissolution for as long as possible, in the hope that Sinn Féin's popularity will decline. Indeed, a senior Sinn Féin person recently expressed the view in conversation that FF and FG in particular were praying that the "shine" would go off his party.

It's worth recalling the last general election, held on February 8, 2020. An opinion poll on January 14, the day the Dáil was dissolved, which was carried out by the Behaviour & Attitudes company for the *Sunday Times*, had Fianna Fáil in first place at 32 per cent, with Fine Gael on 20 per cent just one point ahead of Sinn Féin at 19.

The campaign went very well for Sinn Féin and, when the first-preference votes were counted, the party was on 24.5 per cent as against 22.2 for Fianna Fáil and 20.9 for Fine Gael.

Sinn Féin hadn't run enough candidates to get the full benefit and, after the single transferable votes were fully allocated, FF had 38 TDs compared with 37 for SF and 35 for FG. With a minimum of 80 seats required for a majority, FF and FG teamed up with the Greens, who had risen from two to 12 TDs in the election.

Deaglán  
DE BRÉADÚN



taoiseach Micheál Martin said there were "irreconcilable" differences with SF on core policies. He told the Dáil: "We do not believe that Sinn Féin operates to the same democratic standards held by every other party in this House."

Mind you, one of his predecessors, Seán Lemass, described Fianna Fáil as "a slightly constitutional party" in a Dáil contribution.

Assuming Martin leads Fianna Fáil into the next general election, it seems he might be more open to the prospect of coalition with Sinn Féin.

At that stage of course, the party could have a different leader. Dublin Bay South TD Jim O'Callaghan is mentioned in speculation and a speech he gave last March, entitled "The Political, Economic and Legal Consequences of Irish Reunification", attracted Sinn Féin interest.

The address was delivered remotely to Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, where he was a post-graduate law student in the past. O'Callaghan goes into considerable detail on the practical aspects of Irish unity if it was approved by referendums north and south, laying particular emphasis on the need to provide reassurance to the unionist community.

Whenever it happens, the next general election should be a lively contest. On balance, the parties in government are seen as having dealt reasonably well with the pandemic crisis but we can no doubt expect controversy over measures to meet the cost of borrowing to cover emergency unemployment payments, wage subsidies and business supports.

In addition, public discontent with the housing shortage is close to boiling-point, with echoes of the revolt over water charges a few years ago. Interesting days lie ahead.

*If current figures hold up at the ballot box, Sinn Féin and Fine Gael will be the two largest parties, leaving Fianna Fáil in third place but still having a fair number of TDs*

## ON THIS DAY

JUNE 2 1921

### MPs Talk of Murder

IN THE House of Commons yesterday, Mr [Oswald] Mosley [Labour] asked the Chief Secretary as to the fatal wounds of Patrick Goffin, aged seven years, of Ballinagree, County Cork by a shot fired by a soldier.

Sir Hamar Greenwood said this very sad case was the result of a very tragic mistake. Troops were patrolling rough ground in the mountainous country where a flying column of rebels were supposed to be operating. Captain Wedgwood Benn [Liberal] – Will any compensation be paid to the relatives of the infant boy shot by your agents? This was followed by uproar.

### 'Christian' MP Advocates Murder

SPEAKING at a Unionist demonstration at Dungannon, Mr William Coote, MP said that, although they were in a minority in those counties, they had beaten the combined Sinn Féin and Nationalist forces. He said the operations of the murderer would have to stop. They would not allow the Constabulary to be shot from behind hedges. Where one USC constable was shot down they would put down three Sinn Féiners. (Loud cheers). He was speaking as a Christian.

### Man Shot Dead from Crowd Leaving Craig Meeting

EVIDENCE of a remarkable character was given by police at a Coroner's Inquiry into the circumstances attending the death of John Smith (29) of Seaford Street who was fatally shot during disturbances on the Newtownards Road. Mr Smith, a decorated ex-soldier, was proceeding home.

It was shown that part of an Orange procession returning from Sir James Craig's meeting at the Oval, in defiance of police warnings, proceeded through the Catholic district. According to a constable, members of this mob acted in a disorderly manner and in the course of a riot a Special Constable was arrested for firing a revolver. The Coroner strongly denounced the action of the Unionist crowd.

District Inspector Speers [RIC] said that the deceased was standing on Mountpottinger Road when he received a bullet wound in the head. The police observed a man firing in the crowd and he was taken into custody. He was in plainclothes and it subsequently transpired that he was a Special Constable on duty. Head Constable Johnstone said as the Unionist crowd of 200 or 300 came towards Bridgend they broke into a rush. He noticed men rushing out of houses, some carrying sticks. The foreman said he knew the deceased to be an inoffensive young man. (As the violence rumbled on, the Unionist Premier had no words of condemnation for his supporters who left his meeting to invade a neighbouring Catholic district nor for the sectarian rhetoric of his Orange colleague from South Tyrone.)

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