



ARTICULATE: Five out of the six latest opinion polls published in the south have had Sinn Féin, led by Mary Lou McDonald, in first place and the sixth survey put them joint first with Fine Gael

New generation of southern voters less concerned about Sinn Féin's past

SENATOR Joe McCarthy (1908-57), who had Irish roots in Borrisokane, County Tipperary, and the Rahoon district of Galway City, made his name with "The Red Scare" whereby he claimed in the 1950s that democracy in the US was in danger of being undermined by communists.

The same warning had been issued on the other side of the Atlantic in the previous century and even inspired Marx and Engels to write the ironic opening-line of their manifesto with the words: "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism."

In recent times there has been something of a "Green Scare" in the politics of the Republic and indeed in the north.

That famous Marx and Engels sentence could be updated to read: "A spectre is haunting the island of Ireland – the spectre of Sinn Féin."

The initial reaction from opponents a few years ago was to highlight aspects of Sinn Féin's history and behaviour to show that the party was unsuitable for government.

They were able to draw on the constant, indeed relentless, barrage of allegations against SF at the time, with Gerry Adams often the main focus.

A chapter headed "In the Eye of the Storm" in my 2015 book, *Power Play: The Rise of Modern Sinn Féin*, seeks to convey the atmosphere that had developed.

The party became less vulnerable when it acquired a leader from the post-Troubles generation in the person of Mary Lou McDonald, who took over in February 2018.

Most of the 37 Sinn Féin TDs in the current Dáil are in the same category, with an average age of 47 years according to the latest survey I've seen.

There is also a new generation of voters with little or no experience of

Deaglán DE BRÉADÚN



the bad old days who are less susceptible to verbal onslaughts against SF.

They are more likely to consider Sinn Féin's approach to an issue purely on its merits and without the ingrained suspicions and reservations that might be held by an older generation.

There are other factors involved as well, eg, Sinn Féin has some of the most articulate speakers in Leinster House, such as Pearse Doherty, Eoin Ó Broin and indeed Deputy McDonald herself.

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The cursed coronavirus has of course dominated political and every other form of discourse since it arrived 16 months ago but,

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as things hopefully get back to normal, issues such as housing and healthcare are returning to centre-stage.

Five out of the six latest opinion polls published in the south have had Sinn Féin in first place and the sixth survey put them joint first with Fine Gael. The most recent one available as I write was compiled by Ireland Thinks for *The Irish Mail on Sunday* and shows the party at 32 per cent, compared with 24 for Fine Gael and 15 for Fianna Fáil.

A previous Ipsos MRBI survey published in *The Irish Times* on June 17 had SF scoring 31 points with FG at 27 and FF at 20 per cent. The figures in a Behaviour and Attitudes poll carried in *The Sunday Times* on June 13 were as follows: SF 34, FG 24, FF 20.

In light of Sinn Féin's generally left-wing policies, if you were a member of the moneyed and professional classes you might well be concerned at the prospect of such a party acceding to power. In the 2011 general election, Fine Gael secured 36.1 per cent of first preference votes and won 76 out of a total 166 seats, very close to an overall majority.

Now Sinn Féin seem to be edging towards that level of support or even higher.

If the privileged Bertie Wooster were still around he would instruct his valet: "Press the alarm bell, Jeeves!"

In strictly-legal terms, the next general election to the Dáil does not have to take place until February 2025 and presumably the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael-Green Party coalition allies are tempted to defer it as long as possible, hoping public opinion will change. Meanwhile last month's LucidTalk poll in the *Belfast Telegraph* had Sinn Féin on 25 per cent in the north, with the DUP and Alliance joint second at 16 points.

The next survey should be interesting.

ON THIS DAY

JUNE 23 1921

Royal 'Olive Branch'

THE sojourn of their Majesties in Belfast yesterday in connection with the opening of the Six County Parliament constitutes perhaps the briefest stay of Royalty in any centre of population. Their Majesties landed from the Royal Yacht at Donegall Quay punctually at 11.30 a.m. and re embarked at five minutes past four in the afternoon.

The glamour of a royal pageant could not compensate for the absence of much that goes to make an occasion great and historic. A Parliament brought into being against the will of five-sixths of a nation can never be an historic institution....

From an early hour crowds began to congregate along the route through which the royal procession was to pass. Special Constables were present in large numbers. Police and military were also on duty on the roofs of the shops and dwellings. Shortly after ten o'clock four aeroplanes made their appearance over the centre of the city and stunts of various kinds – looping the loop, spiralled descents – were indulged in. The crowds were so thick at the two corners of Donegall Place at the City Hall that dozens of people fainted and had to be carried [away]....

At the City Hall the Irish Guards lined the staircase, their brilliant scarlet and gold uniforms in striking contrast to the khaki of other regiments and the sombre blue of the police. The arrival of the royal party was heralded by a flourish of trumpets by State Trumpeters. The scene was indeed a brilliant one.... The King then read out the Speech in a clear voice: 'For all who love Ireland, as I do with all my heart, this is a profoundly moving occasion in Irish history. I am confident that the important matters entrusted to the control and guidance of the Northern Parliament will be managed... with fairness and due regard to every faith and interest... I speak from a full heart when I pray that my coming to Ireland today may prove to be the first step towards an end to strife... In that hope I appeal to all Irishmen to pause, to stretch out the hand of forbearance and conciliation, to forgive and forget and to join in making for the land which they love a new era of peace, contentment and goodwill. ...'

THOUGH King George V had effectively set the seal on partition, his carefully-crafted speech – heavily influenced by the South African PM, General Smuts, who was in touch with de Valera – was designed as an 'olive branch' to Sinn Féin with a view to ending the conflict. No nationalist MP attended.

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