



VICTORIOUS: Ivana Bacik, centre, with Labour leader Alan Kelly and supporters as she arrives at the Dublin Bay South by-election count centre
PICTURE: Brian Lawless/PA

Miserable by-election vote piles pressure on Martin

SHOULD the Democratic Unionist Party and Fianna Fáil be comparing notes on how to retain their positions at the top of the political tree?

The DUP has had three different leaders in the last month and a half and last week Fianna Fáil scored a miserable vote of less than 5 per cent in the Dublin Bay South by-election.

Both parties have to contend with the strength of Sinn Féin in their different jurisdictions. The next assembly election in the north will be on or before May 5 next year; last time out in March 2017, SF won 27 seats, just one behind the DUP's 28. In last year's general election down south, FF lost seven of its Dáil seats, coming back with 38 TDs, just ahead of Sinn Féin who rose from 22 to 37 and could have won more if they had run enough candidates. The one big difference is of course that the DUP don't have to worry about SF taking votes from them whereas Sinn Féin are happily taking bites out of the FF support base.

The winner of last week's contest in Dublin Bay South wasn't a Sinn Féiner however: Ivana Bacik ran for Labour. In 11 countrywide opinion polls since March, her party scored between three and five percentage points, but when the votes were counted last Friday she got a remarkable 30.2 per cent of first preferences.

She celebrated her victory by taking a dip in the sea, at Dublin Bay of course. However it's too much to say that the vote marked a sea-change in Irish politics, but it certainly caused some tremors in the political system and among the government parties.

I first met Deputy Bacik, as we must now call her, in 1990 when she was students' union president at Trinity College Dublin. Her paternal grandfather Karel Bacik, who had been a prisoner of the Nazis during the Second World War,

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moved to Ireland with his wife Edith from then-Czechoslovakia in 1946.

When I interviewed her for a series of articles on student politics, she and her friends were celebrating the result of a TCD student referendum where a 68 per cent majority of the 4,721 who voted were in favour of providing the phone-numbers of abortion clinics in Britain. At the time there was a constitutional ban on abortion in the Republic (since repealed).

Abortion wasn't her only subject of interest at the time and she was an active campaigner against the apartheid regime of racial discrimination in South Africa, for example. In 2007 she got elected as a senator in the constituency reserved for TCD graduates and kept her seat in all subsequent contests.

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Although Councillor James Geoghegan failed to hold the Dublin Bay seat for Fine Gael, his 26.2 per cent vote-share was close to what FG achieved in last year's general election, so he would have a good chance of making it to the Dáil next time. Sinn Féin's Lynn Boylan achieved 15.8 per cent, almost on a par with the 16.1 per cent scored by her party colleague Chris Andrews when he was elected as a TD for the constituency last year.

The Green Party vote fell from 22.4 down to eight per cent but the figure that shocked people most was the 4.6 per cent scored by Fianna Fáil, down from 13.8 in the general election. Inevitably there is talk of a heave against Micheál Martin's party leadership although it seems there will be no move against him until he hands over the office of taoiseach to his Fine Gael counterpart and coalition partner Leo Varadkar in December 2022.

Bacik's remarkable vote was due in part to an artistic campaign poster which shows her wheeling a bicycle. Created by Martina Leonard, it doubtless appealed to those who would normally vote Green. Although Bacik was a Labour candidate, the name of the party was presented in rather-modest lettering.

Sinn Féin can feel reasonably content with their performance. The party's candidate had been building up a political base in another constituency for the next general election and stepped into Dublin Bay South at a late stage after a sitting Fine Gael TD resigned. Bacik got a bigger vote because so many people were looking for an alternative to the government parties but were not prepared to buy into the Sinn Féin programme which clearly appeals more to the working and lower middle-classes than the inhabitants of the upper layers in society.

ON THIS DAY

JULY 14 1971

Soldier Shot Dead

ANOTHER soldier was shot dead – the second within 48 hours – in an ambush on a Parachute Regiment patrol at Upper Andersonstown in Belfast early this morning. Both rifle and automatic fire was directed at the Land Rover. The ambush came only hours after a statement in Dublin yesterday by the Provisional wing of the IRA accepting responsibility for the killing of a 30-year-old private in the First Battalion Royal Green Jackets who was hit by a sniper's bullet at an observation post on the roof of a mill on the Falls Road on Monday. The IRA statement said the shooting was in retaliation for 'the murder of two Irish citizens in Derry last week' and threatened 'further retaliatory action in due course'. It added: 'Let bullies beware; this is not August, 1969'. Nineteen arrests were made on a day of unrest and sporadic street disturbances in Ballymurphy yesterday when rubber bullets and CS gas were fired to disperse crowds of youths attacking an army post and where women demonstrated by heckling soldiers and banging dustbin lids.

Death Probe Call Blocked

MR GERRY Fitt, SDLP leader, 'wasn't optimistic' that an official public inquiry will be ordered into the shooting by soldiers of two Derry men last Thursday. But after hour-long talks in London with Lord Balneil, Minister of State for Defence, he said he was reasonably confident that the inquest on Mr Seamus Cusack and Mr Desmond Beattie would be 'speeded up' and that all facilities will be afforded those who wished to give evidence.

The SDLP will withdraw from Stormont and set up 'alternative assembly' unless it gets an assurance that an official inquiry will take place.

Tourists Shy Away

FEWER tourists than ever are visiting NI this year and the numbers are likely to dwindle even further. This is the opinion of hoteliers throughout the Six Counties, hardly any of whom are fully booked up during the July holiday fortnight which is normally the busiest part of the season.

In Bangor, Mr Malachy Lennon, manager of the Royal Hotel, said the people involved in the tourist industry were facing disaster. In Newcastle, the Slieve Donard Hotel said its bookings were substantially down.

THEIR failure to secure an impartial inquiry into the military shooting of the two men in Derry would signal the final abandonment of Stormont by its anti-partition representatives. For the SDLP, elected on a platform of participation in the state institutions, this sudden decision posed major difficulties, especially as Brian Faulkner had just offered them a role in a new committee system at Stormont.

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com