

CLAXON: Sinn Féin president Mary Lou McDonald, left, with Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill

Sinn Féin north/south wins would sound border poll cacophony



Deaglán DE BRÉADÚN

IT HAS been humorously suggested of late that, if Sinn Féin becomes the main party of government in the south and takes over the office of first minister in the north, there will be no need for a border poll.

The republicans would hold the top political jobs in both jurisdictions and, through avoiding a unity referendum, it would still be possible to receive block grant funding from London.

In reality, however, if Mary Lou McDonald becomes taoiseach and Michelle O'Neill is elected first minister, the calls for a referendum on Irish unity would probably become almost deafening.

The latest LucidTalk survey on northern politics, published in the *Belfast Telegraph*, has Sinn Féin on 24 per cent, down one point but still well ahead of the Democratic Unionist Party on 18 per cent, although the latter has gone up five points on its previous showing in this series of polls in August.

Meanwhile, south of the border, a Behaviour & Attitudes poll published in the *Sunday Times* earlier this month has SF at a staggering 37 per cent, 16 points ahead of its nearest rival Fine Gael at 21 per cent, with Fianna Fáil in third place at 20 per cent. On the same day, a poll carried out by Ireland Thinks and published in the *Irish Mail On Sunday* had Sinn Féin on 32 points, with Fine Gael on 24 and Fianna Fáil at 17 per cent.

The assembly election in the north is due to take place on or before May 5 next year but, in the south, the Day of Judgment could in theory be delayed until February 2025.

Up to now there was a fairly widespread view that, in order to achieve a stable parliamentary majority, Mary Lou McDonald and her colleagues would have to explore the possibility of coalition with Fianna Fáil, who would doubtless be seeking quite a significant number of cabinet posts as part of any deal that might emerge. But if the surge reflected in the Behaviour & Attitudes survey is maintained, then the cost of coalition would be considerably less. In this context, it is worth noting that Alan Kelly, leader of the Irish Labour Party (which currently has seven out of 160 Dáil seats, compared to Sinn Féin's 37) recently refused to rule out going into government with SF after the next general election.

Interestingly, Sinn Féin's rise in popularity appears to be mainly due to the party's social and economic policies rather than a surge in republican/nationalist sentiment. The SF package includes delivering 20,000 social and affordable homes in a year, reducing the state pension age to 65 years from the current 66, reducing childcare costs by two-thirds over two years, cutting rents and getting rid of the Local Property Tax on residential dwellings, making sizeable increases in the number of healthcare staff and hospital beds and introducing a freeze of the carbon tax applied to fossil fuels such as petrol, coal and natural gas.

Sinn Féin's rise in popularity appears to be mainly due to the party's social and economic policies rather than a surge in republican/nationalist sentiment

To help pay for these measures, there would be a removal of tax credits for those earning more than €100,000 (approximately £84,000 in sterling) a year. An extra three per cent charge called a "Solidarity Tax" would be imposed on individual incomes above €140,000 (approx. $117,300) although it would hardly generate a widespread feeling of solidarity among those higher earners.

The arrival of Sinn Féin in government would have implications for business and commercial interests and Michael Brennan, Political Editor of the *Business Post*, has carried out an analysis in that context of the Lobbying Register in the Republic of Ireland. In last Sunday's edition of the paper he reported that, "Sinn Féin has been meeting many of the most influential business groups and lobbyists since the party's success in last year's general election."

He continues that the mantra, "We won't talk to Sinn Féin", used to be heard from many business and industry groups but that this has changed because of the party's growing electoral strength.

Meanwhile, former leader of Fianna Fáil and ex-taoiseach Bertie Ahern has come in for criticism in unionist and loyalist circles for saying that people "in East Belfast and in the ghettos" as well as other areas "haven't got a clue" about the Northern Ireland Protocol. Don't be too hard on him folks, he deserves a share of the credit for the generally peaceful era that followed the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

You should know that he has his own particular way with words, commonly known as "Bertiespeak", but, when it comes to the north, his heart is in the right place.

ON THIS DAY

NOVEMBER 24 1921

Death Toll Now 18

THE situation in Belfast yesterday was not so desperate as that of the previous day but there was nevertheless serious trouble, particularly in the York Street, Corporation Street and Garmoyle Street areas. Firing in this area began as early as 5.30 a.m. and was continued at intervals for the greater part of the day. As a result of the shooting, three persons were killed. This makes a total of eighteen deaths for the week. The enforcement of Curfew after nine o'clock in the disturbed areas had a salutary effect. At 5.30 yesterday morning snipers resumed operations in the York Street-North Queen Street districts. Matters were enlivened at about 7.30 during the passage of workmen's tramcars when shots were fired by shipyard workers which were returned from men in the Catholic quarters. A tragic incident occurred in Corporation Street. Patrick Brunton (38), a foreman of a stevedore's firm, was handing out checks to labourers about to start work at the docks when a sniper opened fire on the group, killing him. Mr Patrick Connolly, who was wounded in the abdomen by Orange gunmen who entered the licensed premises at Duncairn Gardens where he worked, succumbed to his injuries in the Mater Hospital last evening. Mr Connolly, a young man of powerful physique, came to Belfast from Tyrone when a boy to serve his apprenticeship to the licensed trade.

New Curfew

THE new Curfew regulations came into force last night in the disturbed areas of the city which presented quite a deserted appearance from nine o'clock onwards. The restrictions operate from 9 p.m. until 5 a.m. and include areas of East and North Belfast.

Dáil Warning over Protestant Workman

The Publicity Department of Dail Eireann states: 'The following letter was sent by the Minister of Labour [Countess Markievicz] to Catholic quarrymen in Carrickmore, County Tyrone: 'It has been reported to us by G M McCartan that he has received notice from you ordering him to dismiss a Protestant workman from his employment under penalty of having his horses stopped. The government of Dail Eireann cannot stand for intimidation and for the penalising of men because of their religion and, unless this intimidation is stopped, we shall place the matter in the hands of the Republican Police.' **FOR the first time since the Truce, Craig's government were now in full control of security, the imposition of Curfew and the deployment of the USC. Meanwhile Countess Markievicz, Dail Minister of Labour, was compelled to warn Catholic workers in Tyrone of an IRA response if they insisted on the dismissal of a Protestant workmate at a quarry in Carrickmore.**

EDITED BY ÉAMON PHOENIX
e.phoenix@irishnews.com