

Irish Daily Mail

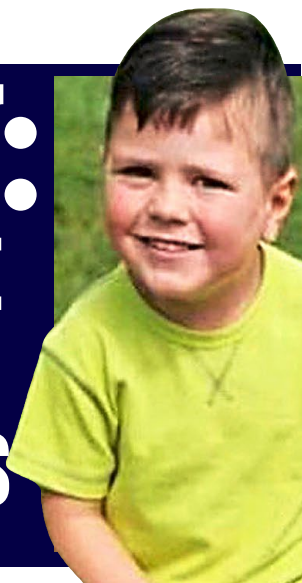
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2024

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'My father is still with me'

Lyric's Claudia Boyle

FEMAIL MAGAZINE



ELECTION WILL BE HELD ON

FRIDAY
29
NOVEMBER

SIMON Harris will call the General Election on Friday, November 8 for a polling day on November 29, senior Government sources have told the Irish Daily Mail.

The Mail also understands that a 'short, sharp' campaign is deemed by senior Fine Gael managers as the best vehicle for the party to reach a target of 45 seats.

But sources in the party believe that as many as 50 seats might be achievable, with some saying: 'We're going to party like it's 2007' – and 'romp' back into power, just as Bertie Ahern's Fianna Fáil did.

With Sinn Féin stumbling from crisis to crisis and its leader Mary Lou McDonald refusing to conduct open press conferences, sources across Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party are making bullish predictions.

One Cabinet source said: 'We are trying to limit this



And they're off... almost: Simon Harris, Micheál Martin and Mary Lou McDonald



EXCLUSIVE

by John Lee

GROUP POLITICAL EDITOR

kind of talk but our candidates and canvassers are reporting back that this campaign is very much like the 2007 one. That means there is a very, very positive [attitude] around returning the Government. Despite

media attacks and controversy Bertie Ahern romped home [in 2007].

'We're saying it quietly, but what they're saying is, "We're going to party like it's 2007".'

The Mail understands

there are at least three leaders' debates planned, with one on Virgin TV's The Tonight Show, as well as a number on RTE.

And Fine Gael handlers are eager for the party to

Turn to Page 4

■ Taoiseach will make the announcement on November 8

■ A short, sharp election campaign

■ Three debates between leaders

■ Coalition leaders have not been told

■ Fine Gael aim to 'party like it's 2007'

REVEALED: SECRETS

Continued from Page One

benefit from any 'Harris hop' and get the Taoiseach to meet as 'many people as possible personally'.

In the 2007 general election, it was Mr Ahern's strength of personality that helped Fianna Fáil claim 78 seats, down just three on 2002. And Fine Gael returned 51, up 20 seats, with the Labour Party then retaining its 20 seats in the Dáil.

Sinn Féin won just four seats in 2007 but, in 2020, went on to command its greatest electoral victory, amassing 37 seats – more than Fine Gael – but it lacked political will from the established parties in forming a government. After a disappointing performance in the local elections, and a litany of crises in recent months, it remains to be seen what support Sinn Féin will now gather from the electorate.

'A short campaign allows for fewer mistakes'

The fate of their deputies will begin to be sealed in just over a fortnight, on November 8, when the Fine Gael leader will walk into Dáil Éireann to notify TDs that he will be asking President Michael D Higgins to dissolve the Dáil and allow a 'short, sharp election campaign' of three weeks.

A small, elite cadre of aides around the Taoiseach are aware of the plans and this timetable has not been discussed with his fellow Coalition leaders, Fianna Fáil's Micheál Martin and the Green Party's Roderic O'Gorman.

Though there was broad agreement between the three men at their Monday leaders' meeting that there will be an election in 2024, the final decision on a date is down to the Taoiseach. Since Mr Harris has expressed a preference for a Friday election day, there had also been speculation on the November 29 polling date, along with November 22 and December 6.

While the confirmation from within the Department of An Taoiseach will focus minds, the revelation of a November 8 launch date will surprise many. This is a shorter election run than many expected.

'The Taoiseach wants a short campaign,' said a senior Department of An Taoiseach official, 'this allows for fewer political mistakes and, hopefully, sufficient time for our side to get their message across.'

There is a belief that the Opposition will try and have a Dáil

Three weeks and 14 new policy launches... In fascinating detail, how this crucial campaign will unfold...

recess next week cancelled and the parliament recalled.

However, Government sources said this will fail.

This would facilitate the quicker passing of the only major legislation required for an election: crucially the Finance Bill, to pave the way for financial changes made in the Budget, which will soon benefit many in their take-home pay with changes to the USC and tax bands.

Finance Ministers Jack Chambers and Paschal Donohoe are currently at an IMF conference in Washington DC. The Bill will be brought forward on November 5 and will be rushed through.

It is planned that Fine Gael will do 14 policy launches during the campaign. It is believed that some

of the Taoiseach's closest aides are unhappy with the number of staged events because, along with the number of days he will have to take off for leaders' debates it will limit Mr Harris from his area of strength.

'We want Simon meeting as many people as possible, personally, which means canvassing on the streets and roads,' said an aide, 'we might try and cut down on some of the events he attends,' a source said.

There are plans for at least three leaders' debates during the election campaign.

There will be two debates between the leaders' of the three largest parties in the Dáil: Mr Harris, Mr Martin and Ms McDonald. There will be at least one

debate with the leaders of as many Dáil groupings as possible.

With the election starting gun being fired here on November 8 and the poll taking place 21 days, it means just weeks will separate

'A win for the forces of stability'

it from the presidential election in the United States on Tuesday, November 5.

With the US result almost certain to be finalised, it will cast an influence on the tone of the campaign. The Coalition will be hoping that Kamala Harris and not Donald Trump comes through as

the winner. 'A win for the forces of stability over the forces of populism will help our messaging here,' said a Government source.

Meanwhile, it is believed that Sinn Féin leader Ms McDonald will be advised by her team not to conduct an open press conference or what is known as a 'doorstep' for the entire campaign.

Though Ms McDonald has conducted a number of carefully selected broadcast media interviews since the series of controversies hitting her party since the end of September she has not held a press conference proper.

A Sinn Féin source said: 'You can't control those things, we've never been fans of them in the first place. But if Mary Lou has no-holds-barred, unmonitored



Plans to publish revised housing targets



Homes: Minister O'Brien with tenants at a housing event held yesterday

QUESTION marks hang over Government plans to publish revised housing targets ahead of the general election, as the Housing Minister revealed the work is 'still ongoing'.

Darragh O'Brien was due to publish new housing targets for next year and the years ahead, and was to include aims for social, affordable, rental and private ownership homes. The Fianna Fáil minister said the work of the National Planning Framework – which will feed into the new targets – has not concluded.

The three coalition leaders, Taoiseach Simon Harris,

By Cate McCurry

Tánaiste Micheál Martin and Green Party leader Roderic O'Gorman met with the Housing Minister earlier this week.

It had been understood that the revised housing targets would be published before the electorate go to the polls.

'We had a good meeting this week – what we need to do is not just set the targets, but show how we can get there,' Mr O'Brien said.

'Also, the National Planning Framework has a big say in that, in relation to how much land we need to zone, our population projections,

where we need to build those homes, so the two are actually related. The work is not concluded on that yet.

'We are looking in the range of 50,000-plus. I don't think that will come as any surprise to people, but it's important as well that people know how we're going to get there.

'Some in the opposition [say] they will deliver 60,000 and 70,000 [homes]. I know as a reality, as someone who took over when we were delivering 20,000 homes a year, the work that has taken to nearly double that output, to hopefully this year, to be on or about 40,000.' He went

on: 'That required serious investment by the State, the Affordable Housing Act, the Land Development Agency Act. It also requires a reform of our planning system.'

Earlier this year, the Economic and Social Research Institute published a report which shows that the State needs to build around 44,000 new homes a year, but the figure did not include estimates for unmet demand.

The Housing Commission later said there is a need for between 15,000 and 25,000 new homes a year to meet unmet demand. Mr O'Brien said the Planning and Devel-

OF ELECTION PLAN

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Get your motor running: Taoiseach Simon Harris helping to launch Irish Design Week yesterday

press conferences, they will turn into total chaos.'

These statements carry further echoes of the 2007 General Election, when an embattled Fianna Fáil leader Mr Ahern avoided press conferences for the first week of the campaign to neutralise questioning about his finances. When he finally broke his silence, at a press conference in Dublin's Mansion House, journalist Vincent Browne turned the event into one of the most memorable ever in a general election.

Earlier this week, Fine Gael leader Mr Harris hinted at this preferred polling day, remarking: 'I like elections on a Friday. Friday is a good day to have an election. So therefore, there's not that many Fridays to choose from.'

'But right now, it's important that people put their shoulders to the wheel in this place [Government Buildings] and in Leinster House and get the people's work done, get the Finance Bill passed. We have a very busy agenda this week.'

Fianna Fáil leader Mr Martin said of legislation he would like to see passed before an election: 'The Mental Health Bill, I would have wished to [see passed], but I think there are significant amendments to come on that, it might not even be ready for February. The Defamation Bill, again, has challenges, but I would like to see that move on to committee stage, if at all possible, in the lifetime of this Dáil.'

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'still ongoing'

opment Bill, recently signed into law, will be the 'biggest reform' of the State's planning system in decades. 'It'll deliver consistency, certainty and clarity within our planning process, to make it more effective, to help us deliver the homes and the strategic infrastructure that we want,' he said.

'There is still work to be done on the targets, and certainly, as you saw from the ESRI zone report, there were 12 different scenarios within there.'

While a date for the general election has not yet been confirmed by Mr Harris, it is expected to take place on Friday, November 29. The emergency

homeless figures are also published on the last Friday of each month.

Mr O'Brien said the release of figures clashing with polling day 'wouldn't come into my mind'.

He added: 'The decision on the date itself is, obviously the three leaders will meet on that, and then I'll be asked to sign the polling day order.'

'The electorate understand how government works. They, most of them, understand the work that we've done, and also understand the challenges that are there. I've said to you very honestly today as well, that homelessness remains the number one challenge.'

ANALYSIS by Craig Hughes

POLITICAL EDITOR



T IRED, jaded and potentially destined for the political wilderness. The outlook has shifted seismically for Sinn Féin during the lifetime of this Government.

They stunned the political establishment in January 2020 when they came to the brink of power in the Republic for the first time.

Now weeks away from another general election, it seems impossible that Sinn Féin will woo voters as it did in January 2020, after being hit with a series of scandals and isolating themselves from their core voter base.

It looks like Sinn Féin will reside in the Opposition benches for the foreseeable with much of the progress up the long road to power being lost.

The party's supporters once believed that Sinn Féin's past was truly in the past and that they were the only option for 'change' for their generation.

The same cannot be said now. Last weekend, a new opinion poll put Sinn Féin on 16%, a fall of two points since September and its lowest figure in any poll of general election voting intentions since December 2019.

It's a substantial plummet from a high of 36% in the summer of 2022.

Fine Gael lead with 25%, helped by the 'Harris hop' with its new, energetic leader, while Fianna Fáil is on 19.9%.

Sinn Féin has been engulfed in scandals, first relating to former press officer Michael McMonagle, a now convicted child sex offender, and his two colleagues who provided references to him for a job with the British Heart Foundation while he was awaiting trial.

Details remain unclear around the resignation of veteran TD Brian Stanley who said he was subjected to a 'kangaroo court' after a complaint was made against him by a party member.

However, it is the party's handling of the case of the disgraced former senator Niall Ó Donnghaile that underscores the question marks that remain around their credibility.

Mr Ó Donnghaile sent inappropriate messages to a 16-year-old who was a member of the party's youth wing, Ogra Shinn Féin, yet he was allowed a dignified retirement equipped with a 'glowing' statement from party leader Marty Lou McDonald.

The party was made aware of the complaint on September 11 last year and he was suspended a day later. On October 5, he agreed to resign from the party. It all sounded as if normal processes were in train.

Then on December 21, Mr Ó Donnghaile informed the Oire-

From the brink of power, Sinn Féin face the doldrums



Say hello, wave goodbye: Is Mary Lou's time up as leader?

achtas that he was resigning as a Senator on health grounds.

Ms McDonald issued a 'glowing' statement thanking him for his 'diligent' work and wished him well for the future. He went on to send other inappropriate messages to other men.

On Tuesday, Ms McDonald was forced into 'offering a full, unequivocal and sincere apology' to the teenager in the Dáil and apologised for the 'hurt' caused by her statement paying tribute to Mr Ó Donnghaile following his resignation.

Finally, the realisation that the child victim at the centre of the case is the most important person in this sorry episode had dawned on Ms McDonald after a week of pressure.

But her decision to make the initial statement requires a deeper analysis. What would motivate her to allow Mr Ó Donnghaile to fade away into 'retirement' without facing public scrutiny?

Crucially, Mr Ó Donnghaile descends from IRA royalty. His father Patrick Donnelly was sentenced to eight years in Long Kesh in 1972. Mr Donnelly Sr, then aged 21, was charged with armed hijacking and burning out a bus in October 1971.

He and his two co-accused refused to recognise the court and ignored all remarks made to them. The 40-year-old star witness, Sydney Agnew, a bus driver, was shot dead at his front door in front of his six-year-old child before he could give evidence at trial.

Father-of-three Mr Agnew had already signed a deposition and his evidence was used to secure their convictions.

Mr Donnelly received an additional three years to his sentence for his part in an attempted breakout from Long Kesh, along with five others.

Mr Ó Donnghaile's mother also served time in prison alongside Provisional IRA member Mairéad O'Farrell.

Ms Farrell, an aunt of Sinn

Féin TD for Galway West with the same name, was shot and killed by the British Army in Gibraltar on March 6, 1988.

A ND when Mr Ó Donnghaile was elected to the Seanad, his political adviser was Jim Gibney, who signed Bobby Sands' by-election nomination and ran the hunger striker's election campaign in 1981.

The party's first leader, Gerry Adams, told the trial of his brother, Liam, in 2013 that his brother admitted sexually abusing his own daughter in 2000. Yet Mr Adams did not report the allegations to police until 2008.

Protecting 'good Republicans' is something the party of 'change' is unwilling to bend from. There was no question that the son of Republican royalty would be thrown before the court of public opinion if it could be dealt with internally.

The Troubles may not register with younger voters but the optics of potentially shielding a man in a position of power sending inappropriate messages to a child resonates with all.

It is difficult to see how this scandal does not become the final chapter in Ms McDonald's tenure as leader of the party.

In January 2020, in the wake of the general election, she declared that Sinn Féin would provide the 'most effective Opposition in the history of the State'.

Now, in the dying months of this Government, the main Opposition party has been left with little credible standing. Democracy and the public has lost out as a result.

Now, Sinn Féin faces the prospect of having to rebrand all over again, but to what and to whom.

The crucial question is whether they will be able to rebrand with Ms McDonald at the helm?