



Dr Garret Fitzgerald, leader of Fine Gael

the poll last February, and the resulting row at the Labour Ard Fheis (conference) in October led to the leader Michael O'Leary defecting to Fine Gael. The October conference decided to postpone a decision on whether to go into coalition until after an election. O'Leary and many others felt this was cheating the voters in refusing to say what they were ultimately offering. It was felt the party would be annihilated for asking for a blank cheque.

In the event, a working class backlash against the outgoing Fianna Fail government for its heavy handed health cuts and disastrous economic record, and the boost to party morale of jettisoning a leader with a reputation for the high life, helped Labour hold up its vote.

Labour's recent predicament has highlighted the apparently inescapable plight of the Irish Left in the Dail (parliament). With both main parties being of the Right, the Left is reduced to either sniping from the backbenches or joining coalitions as junior partners. Labour militants are convinced the latter course has been the kiss of death, submerging their radical policies beneath those of the larger FG ally.

As Labour enter government again this problem continues to hang over them. Fine Gael was deliberately vague in its election campaign about its hair shirt plan for crisis management. But controversial health, education, and social welfare cuts are certain. Taxation of short term dole payments is also a possibility and may make Labour wonder what they are doing in such an alliance.

Differences like these and the small majority of six seats over the combined opposition will make FG leader Dr Garret Fitzgerald's survival as Prime Minister for a full term less than a certainty. Mindful of the source of his Dail support, Fitzgerald has emphasised his determination to tackle the deep rooted problem of poverty — 20% of the population depend on social welfare as their

IRISH ELECTIONS

Emerging from November's general election, the Irish Labour Party was faced with the sort of political choice that would give most socialists nightmares. It had, in effect, to decide which of two right wing parties to put into power.

Past alliances and hostility to the idea of holding up a corrupt Haughey-led Fianna Fail administration effectively decided the issue. One remaining dilemma was whether Labour would support Fine Gael from the backbenches or as a full coalition partner. Within days of the poll Garret Fitzgerald, the FG leader, made it plain that coalition would be the only item on the agenda for negotiations with Labour. A repeat of the instability that had dogged the preceding 18 months was not on.

But the apparent inevitability of supporting Fine Gael again has had many Labour stalwarts wondering what if anything remains of their independent identity as socialists. The issue caused considerable acrimony in the party after its poor showing in

main income — and moderate spending cuts with measures to protect the less well-off. How much of these commitments will survive beyond election rhetoric remains to be seen.

Another possible rift in the coalition ranks may result from the monetarist drift of Fine Gael economic planners, notably John Bruton, the 34 year old Finance Minister under the last Fine Gael-led administration. Labour leaders have consistently warned they will not accept an Irish version of Thatcherism.

There is a coalition consensus, however, on the inevitability of big cuts in runaway state spending — partly resulting from the Fianna Fail tactic of buying expensive votes in the short term and worrying about the consequences later. This led to maintaining an unnecessary oil refinery in Cork at huge expenses, a £57m deal for North Dublin development to secure the vote of independent socialist TD (MP) Tony Gregory, and most bizarre of all, the building of an international airport near the shrine at Knock in the bogs of Co Mayo to win votes in the Gaelic-speaking West.

The country now has one of the world's highest per capita foreign debts, a fact that has led to enormous inflationary pressures. Labour have accepted the need to cut this debt as an urgent priority. Their only difference with Fine Gael on this is wanting to plan repayments over six instead of four years to avert higher unemployment and deeper recession.

A key factor in the return of coalition government has been the decline in Fianna Fail's traditionally large working class vote. Unemployment on a par with that of Britain and Belgium, roaring inflation — more than double the UK figure — and crippling income tax on PAYE workers have swung votes to Labour and the Marxist Workers' Party. The transferrable vote PR system helps pass their anti-FF votes on to Fine Gael in constituencies where Left candidates fail.

One of the enduring features of Irish politics apparent in the last election has been the unwillingness of voters to move from one of the two big parties constituted on the republican divide to the other. Disillusioned voters therefore switch their first preferences to Labour and the Workers' Party.

What is now emerging is a growing urban working class vote for parties of the Left. Particularly in Dublin's huge bleak housing estates that have sprung up without even a minimum of services since the boom years of the 60s and early 70s, old FF/FG allegiances are crumbling. Significantly, Fianna Fail long regarded as Europe's most efficient

vote-getting machine, has now seen its share of Dail seats slide from over 100 in 1977 to just 75 today. It now holds a mere 18 out of 48 seats in the Dublin constituencies.

The rising Workers' Party, though down to two seats after taking three last February, increased its overall share of the vote to 3.3% (Labour hold 9.4%). Its main success this time round has been in getting veteran party leader Tomas MacGiolla elected at the top of the poll in Dublin West.

Its party membership is, by contrast, the youngest of all. It operates a forceful brand of community politics alongside vocal pressure on national issues, and is likely to consolidate its strength in opposition.

Alan Murdoch