

THE IRISH ELECTION, by Dr Ed Gouge.

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In last month's election in the Republic of Ireland, the anger of the public about the country's economic situation turned into what some commentators have called a 'paper revolution' as Fianna Fáil, the governing party for most of the time since 1932, lost half of its vote and all the opposition parties gained. The shock of the economic collapse and the need for a rescue package from the EU is, however, affecting more than just party politics and questions are being asked about Ireland's political system and the cosy relationship between its economic and political elites. The main parties have all produced reform proposals including abolishing the upper house, changing the voting system and ending party appointments to public bodies.

Fianna Fáil managed what the Labour Party failed to do in Britain and changed its leader just before the election. Even the outgoing Finance Minister admitted that Brian Cowen had failed to give insufficient leadership during the crisis, but his replacement by Micheál Martin, to face the uncharismatic Fine Gael leader, Enda Kenny, made no difference, for the voters had made up their mind a year before. Fianna Fáil went from 77 to 19 seats and lost its Deputy Leader while Fine Gael went from 51 to 76 and the moderate Labour Party from 20 to 37. Sinn Féin went from 4 to 14 seats and Gerry Adams was easily elected in Louth. They were able to compete with Fianna Fáil as representing Irish nationalism and with Labour as representing the working class and the only party to reject the EU package in its entirety.

Supporters of PR in Britain, not satisfied with the AV proposal, might not spend too long considering the Irish STV as an alternative system. Irish MPs are elected for 3 to 5 member seats by a complicated process by which voters list all candidates in order and the lowest candidates are eliminated with the voters' next preference redistributed, as are the surplus votes of winning candidates. It does give voters a lot of choice but a side effect is that candidates of the same party compete against each other to see who can get the most preference votes, avoid elimination and get elected. Parties also have to judge how many candidates; too many and the vote is split and they all get eliminated, too few and you miss out on seats as Fine Gael may have done in a few places this time.

A Fine Gael minority government with the support of Independents was possible, especially as Fianna Fáil had promised responsible opposition but governments have done this before and it means buying off the Independents with money for projects in their constituencies, difficult in the current climate. A Fine Gael/ Labour coalition provided more stability to see through the EU package and, after several days negotiation, was agreed. Unlike the Coalition in Britain, the two parties split the difference over the speed of public expenditure cuts and the number of public sector jobs to be lost.

The Fine Gael/Labour coalition has a large majority and looks set to be there to the next general election and, given the time it will take for Fianna Fáil to recover, maybe beyond that. It remains uncertain what it can deliver though. Kenny made renegotiation of the EU package a part of his election programme and went to his first EU summit with a proposal to reduce the interest rate on

the loan. However, EU negotiations rarely give something for nothing and Germany was soon asking for an increase in Ireland's exceptionally low corporation tax, or even support for the harmonisation of corporation taxes, so nothing has been agreed. Some prominent Labour figures opposed the incorporation of their party into an austerity coalition and come the next general election may be proved right. Labour was ahead of Fine Gael in the opinion polls in 2010 and a Fine Gael government with tacit support from Fianna Fáil would have allowed Labour to be the main opposition and its leader, Eamon Gilmore to continue his attack on the two centre right parties as 'Celtic Tories' and position Labour for a realignment of Irish politics.