



# Fine Gael

## Reading the Past to Shape the Future

### Review of 2016 Election

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August 2016



## Context

*“The past is never closed down and receives the meaning we give it by our subsequent acts.”*

Czesław Miłosz

The Taoiseach, Enda Kenny and the General Secretary of Fine Gael, Tom Curran asked me to “provide an independent opinion” on the Fine Gael election campaign of 2016. I decided to listen to the views of a wide range of people, to review documentation associated with the campaign, to look at some of the campaigns conducted by FG since the previous election and to examine some contextual features of election campaigns and referendums in other countries in the last five years.

I met with a wide range of people and did so on the basis that what they had to say was being said in confidence and that this report would not name those to whom I had spoken. I got wide-ranging perspectives and a lot of very important insights from these interviews. I also attended a meeting of FG County Councillors, the FG Executive Council and an election review meeting conducted with constituency chairs and directors of election. At each of these meetings I heard a broad variety of views. I spread the word that I was anxious to hear from people and would like to thank especially those who went to the trouble of writing to me. I felt it important to get a strong external perspective and therefore spoke to a number of people who have no connections with Fine Gael.

From the outset I decided to focus on the future; there is no merit that I can see in writing an alternative script for the past. The next election campaign is underway and the focus is now on how Fine Gael prepares for that event.

In parallel with my activity, a group of TDs were also reviewing the election. They had undertaken to do so at a parliamentary party meeting held just after the election. When I met the Taoiseach to discuss this report for the first time, he suggested that this group would look in particular at the election from the perspective of the local constituencies and that they would be better positioned to cover the regional dimension of the election. They have, I understand, undertaken constituency/regional surveys and interviews and have created a composite set of recommendations arising from their work. I would like to thank this group for meeting me on a number of occasions. As elected representatives, they have experience, knowledge, insights and expertise that I do not have so what they have done will, I am sure, make an important and significant contribution to the totality of the review.

My recommendations are just that - recommendations. Those that I offer will provide a basis for discussion and action; they should not be read as dogmatically prescriptive. In many ways I have come to feel that my primary contribution to this Fine Gael review lies in the opportunity it afforded many people to say what they wanted to say and to articulate what needs to be done. What emerges over the next few months will - if those changes occur - enable Fine Gael to continue to play an influential role in Ireland’s future. I would caution however that there is not a lot of time available. The protracted discussions on government formation that followed a dour campaign may lead some to hope for a period of “peace and quiet”. The sentiment is understandable but entirely misguided.

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Among many of those who spoke to me there was a rueful recognition that Fine Gael's preparation for the election had contributed to the results it achieved. There was an acknowledgement that Fine Gael had made some poor decisions and that its capacity to respond quickly and decisively to national sentiment was flawed. There was wide-spread recognition that a flawed organisational structure was in need of reform. There was also an understanding that the old certainties of electioneering are no longer as persuasive as they once were and that established political parties face a real challenge in defining their identity and validity.

To some extent an exercise like this just acts as a further impetus for changes that are already underway. In the aftermath of the election, I have seen evidence of change in the conduct of business in the Parliamentary Party and in the approach adopted by the Executive Council to its work. There are changes underway among the administrative and advisor groupings. There is a new Chair of the Parliamentary Party and of the Fine Gael group in the Seanad and they are already implementing positive changes.

My singular focus in this review is Fine Gael and how it shapes its future. There is a distinction between the Government and Fine Gael and this distinction is reflected in the compromise that forms the Programme for Government. Notwithstanding its commitment to this Programme, Fine Gael's own convictions and policies must be clearly articulated and communicated even while it leads this Minority Government. And when Fine Gael next asks the electorate for a vote, it should be able to point to those elements of its policies that have been implemented and to the measurable improvements it has achieved. It should have a clearly stated vision of the kind of Ireland it wants to see develop and the actions it would like to take to see that vision realised.

I make **nine** key recommendations. They each deal with a separate element of Fine Gael so need to be read as a total package. Following a short section on implementation, I have then provided a more detailed analysis of each recommendation.

There are a lot of people, in and outside Fine Gael, who have little faith in reports - their scepticism will be justified unless project, implementation and review plans for those recommendations accepted by Fine Gael are put in place. There is a danger that in reading the recommendations some will focus on all the negatives. I was not writing a hymn of praise but it should not be forgotten that there is much to admire in Fine Gael and that much has been achieved. At a time when politicians and political institutions are subjected to a lot of criticism and disdain, I found plenty of evidence of honourable people working hard to improve our wellbeing.

Finally, there is a section I've called, "What to Say and What to Do". This echoes a line from Seamus Heaney's Beowulf that contains the great word "gumption". Its purpose is to provide a broader framework for this report. There are wider societal influences at work both in and upon Fine Gael and then there is the microcosm that is the Fine Gael social infrastructure. I've made some observations in relation to each.

The volatility of national and international politics is evident to all. I do not anticipate any return to old certainties here or elsewhere. Fine Gael is well capable of coping with change and of providing thoughtful and confident political leadership in this environment. Recharging its gumption will help.

Marion Coy

August 2016

### Key Recommendations

1. Fine Gael should define its future as a campaigning party, anchored in local communities and tackling clearly identified national issues.
2. Fine Gael should build a strong network of connections at all levels in Irish society and become much more open to external influences. This change also requires substantial external input into the structural elements of the party.
3. A structural reorganisation is required in order to create effective cohesion across all elements of the party. To achieve this reform a new Steering Group should be established and a Director of Policy appointed.
4. Fine Gael's administrative structure needs realignment with the proposed orientation and development of the party.
5. Fine Gael's Research Strategy and methodology should be completely overhauled.
6. Fine Gael's communication strategies need to become more open and more diverse.
7. Mobilisation of party membership must be effected through the development of issue-based campaigns and the broadening of mechanisms for party engagement.
8. A more cohesive, and organised approach should be taken to the mobilisation of all elected representatives in pursuit of an annually agreed work programme.
9. Future electoral strategy and planning must be conducted in a more inclusive manner and take into account the failures in vision, empathy, planning, tactical positioning, communication, campaigning and responsiveness identified in the 2016 campaign.

## From Recommendations to Results

- Fine Gael members, representatives and staff should be given an opportunity to read this review at the earliest possible opportunity and comment on it. There should be an agreed tight deadline (four weeks) for this response.
- It should be agreed that incremental change is desirable but that it must take place within agreed deadlines.
- The Steering Group (recommended in this review) should have both the responsibility and authority required to oversee the implementation of recommendations. They should have the final authority on which recommendations will be implemented.
- The Steering group should be established on an ad hoc basis in order to kick-start the changes.
- In effect, a project plan with agreed timelines should be used to frame each adopted recommendation. This plan should contain a sub-set (with individual timelines) for each of the major sections of the recommendations.
- Progress should be monitored at regular intervals and a bi-annual overview of progress should be prepared.
- Constitutional Changes (such as that proposed in the membership of the Executive Council) should be voted on at the next Árd Fheis.
- The appointment of a Director of Policy is an urgent matter.
- The Steering Committee should ensure that all elements of the party are kept fully briefed on developments.
- There must be absolute clarity on who has both the responsibility and authority in relation to each change project.
- A written implementation report should be made available to all members, representatives and staff by an agreed date. This should be no longer than one year from the adoption of the recommendations.

## Section One

### 1. Fine Gael Defining its Future

Fine Gael needs to change and it needs to go into the next election as a changed party. All those who are part of Fine Gael must own this change. In 2011 Fine Gael promised a new way of doing politics. Voters did not see sufficient evidence of change; now there is another opportunity to work on this promise.

- The distinctive identity of the party should be framed by reference to its origins in constitutional republicanism and its broad appeal to moderate, thoughtful citizens. It is a party, which needs to be proud of its pragmatic idealism and its determination to use its competence in financial management to generate the resources required to address the problems of our citizens.
- The party's appetite for risk-taking needs to be encouraged. For this to happen, the prevailing culture, which tends to be overly cautious and reluctant to look beyond a narrow pool of perceived expertise, needs to change. Within Fine Gael, in all components of the party structure, I met people who could lead this change. They need to be encouraged to do so by the proposed new FG Steering Group.
- There is a compelling need for more internal debate, for less deference to some self-appointed sources of authority and for a willingness to engage with alternative viewpoints.
- Recognition for the primacy of the interests of Fine Gael as a party must be re-established. This necessitates acceptances that the party's interests do not always align with the desires or self-interest of individuals.
- Its citizen focus should now lead to the development of a much wider range of methods and platforms for people to engage with the party. Fine Gael headquarters must develop its creative, technical and networking capacity at all levels in order to facilitate this development
- Confident of its policies, Fine Gael should communicate its thinking with conviction, accept the validity of other opinions that accord with its position and robustly challenge those viewpoints which it does not accept. This approach requires a change in its patterns of external engagement.

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- The volatility of national and international politics signals an unwillingness of electorates everywhere to accept traditional political patterns of behaviour. A vote must be won by providing credible, persuasive policies and credible, persuasive and committed candidates for election at local and national level. Fine Gael needs to become rigorous in its approach to both of these dimensions.

## 2 Connecting to Society

Fine Gael must conceive of itself as a campaigning party and as a party that is constantly focused on people, on their needs, concerns, anxieties AND their hopes and aspirations. A strong alternative to the politics of fear, anxiety and negativity is required. Fine Gael can provide this alternative perspective. The economic policy of Fine Gael has as its primary function the realisation of the resources required to improve our society for all its people. This focus must permeate all Fine Gael thinking and policy.

Fine Gael must:

- Develop a core programme that addresses the key issues Fine Gael believes need attention. These issues should be identified through the prism of individual and societal wellbeing.
- Agree key issues (a small number) that FG will address in the immediate future. Build both a national and local response and campaign around these issues. They should be identified and selected because people see them as important to their wellbeing as individuals and to their families and communities.
- In selecting issues/problems to be addressed, attention must be paid to what is achievable and there must be a focus on time-based outcomes. The issues must be of compelling importance to people and must be amenable to political impact
- Create a shared statement of what FG stands for. This must be a conviction and value-based statement that is used as a touchstone for policy formulation. It should provide the framework for differentiating FG from other political parties. The distinctive identity of FG must encompass its political, social, economic and cultural positions. It must always reference the kind of society Fine Gael is working to achieve.
- Create a much wider variety of interfaces for FG with the public. These should include, but are not limited to, interest groups, project groups to address specific problems, professional groups and underrepresented groups in national politics. The intent here is to use the FG organisation as a fulcrum/conduit. Many of these groups will form and then disband to be replaced by others. It is imperative that this approach seeks to attract a diverse range of participants and it is to be expected that many of those who get involved may have no inclination to join any political party
- Make considerable use of Citizen Assemblies with a tight adherence to a limited number of issues and an absolute commitment to dealing with their recommendations. Other vehicles for citizen engagement should be used, particularly at local level. There is considerable evidence that people, when presented with independent evidence and reasoned argument, will be more than willing to engage with complex problems and to propose



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reasonable solutions. In effect, the mechanisms for national and community engagement must move outside the current party structures.

- Have a structured programme of constituency-based activity agreed by the National Steering Group and co-ordinated by headquarters. In this context the generation of more complete membership information is important so that under-utilised expertise, available across the country is identified. The role of regional organisers needs to be completely reviewed in the light of this proposal.

### 3 Structural Reorganisation

- The Taoiseach, the General Secretary, the Deputy Leader of FG, the Chair of the Parliamentary Party and the Chair of the Executive Council should form a new Steering Group. Its purpose is to develop party cohesion, ensure a flow of information and communication, and act as a single locus of combined decision-making. This Steering Group needs to become active immediately and to drive the changes required.
- With immediate effect, Fine Gael should appoint a Director of Political Policy - this person should be charged with developing the policy position of the party, with consulting widely on policy direction and with communicating that policy. This person should report to the Steering Group.
- The Steering Group and Director of Political Policy must oversee the identification of key national issues and the mobilisation of resources to address these issues. There must be absolute clarity about their overarching responsibility and authority in respect of this role.
- The Steering Group and the Director of Political Policy should effectively form the electoral steering group.
- The role of Chair of the Parliamentary Party should be enhanced with the elected incumbent having a central role in liaison with headquarters, a key role in steering the proposed new work programme of the Parliamentary Party and a central role in decision-making on party policy and organisation.
- The role of the Deputy Leader of FG should (when the party is in government) have a particular focus on dealing with the FG organisation at constituency level.
- A consistent and protracted programme of engagement with both Fine Gael members and a wide range of key external influencers must be undertaken with immediate effect. It must be a requirement on all staff, advisors and elected members to engage in this programme. This proposal should form the basis of a key Fine Gael Project with concomitant specific objectives, timelines and feedback mechanisms.
- The role of the Trustees in relation to legal and financial governance and oversight must be clarified and the distinction between governance and management maintained.
- The Trustees must be regularly and comprehensively briefed on standard governance issues. There should be a regular agenda for these meetings and standard operating procedures for Trustee meetings should be created.

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- The composition of the Executive Council should be reviewed so that some external experts are brought into the group. The external members should be selected by the National Steering Group on the basis of their complementarity to the elected membership. At least one of these external appointments should have a background in E.U./international affairs.
- The lines of communication to and from Local Authority Members need a complete overhaul.
- The existing range of Fine Gael interest groups should be broadened and their members afforded mechanisms for appointment/representation on party entities such as the Executive Council. In this context the functioning of YFG should be reviewed.

## 4 Administrative Structure

- FG staff, including advisors, (regardless of where they are based) should be assigned new roles based on the proposed new orientation of the party. This will include all staff becoming much more focused on the external environment, building relationships in new directions, dismantling traditional boundaries and becoming more collegiate.
- A skills/expertise audit of staff should be undertaken in order to identify underutilised individuals and to address the development requirements of others. This skills audit should also form the basis for any future staff recruitment.
- FG needs to implement a new internal staffing structure. This structure should have clear reporting relationships; defined responsibilities for different roles, and a project management focus. The performance of all staff must be reviewed as part of an annual programme of performance management. This restructuring should be undertaken immediately.
- The reporting relationship for the General Secretary should be clarified.
- Business continuity planning needs to be undertaken as a matter of urgency.
- Administrative staff should, where feasible, be rotated around posts in the organisation so that they become familiar with different elements of the organisation.
- A programme of professional development should be put in place that is aligned with the future needs of the organisation.
- As a matter of urgency Fine Gael headquarters should develop an intern programme that brings new perspectives into the organisation.
- On a regular basis, Fine Gael senior management should seek to engage with external influencers from a variety of backgrounds.
- The linkages with E.U. (and other) political parties that share common political perspectives should be strengthened. This should include the regular exchange of ideas and occasional exchange of staff.
- The very poor communications between Fine Gael staff employed in a variety of capacities and locations must be addressed urgently. This requires a willingness to change by all involved.

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- The role of ministerial advisors must be reviewed. There is an absolute need for professional expertise and the creation of a cadre of career professional advisors has brought many benefits. It has led to some change in the internal decision-making environment and this needs careful appraisal. A separate review of this group should be undertaken in order to look at the totality of their expertise, with particular attention to the diversity (or lack of) within this cadre. The advisor group itself should have a role in this review. In addition, there must be a balance achieved between the influence of this group and that of other legitimate opinion in Fine Gael.

## 5 Research

- Fine Gael must revitalise its approach to research and it is absolutely essential that it develop a more comprehensive approach. It needs to look at models in use outside the political domain and to take external advice on how to proceed. But the party must conduct rigorous research.
- The party needs to review its approach to undertaking commercial market research. This should include an invitation to a number of organisations active in this domain in Ireland to tender for the work.
- The terms of reference for the tender should pay particular attention to the track record of companies who have a thorough familiarity with Irish electoral processes.
- The internal research function should be consolidated into one entity reporting to the Director of Policy. This internal unit needs to use a variety of instruments to get a broad understanding of the range of issues which concern the electorate and to establish a prioritisation of FG responses to key national concerns. The research unit should work exclusively on the work programme agreed by the Steering Group and the Director of Policy.
- The selection of one or more companies to carry out market research should be undertaken by the proposed new Steering Group and the Director of Policy.
- The structure and processes of research should extend well beyond the commercial market research undertaken on behalf of the party. It should include -but not be confined to -seeking widespread feedback from various project groups, party membership, local authority members and a range of external experts.
- The findings of research conducted on behalf of the party must be communicated to a much wider grouping than has hitherto been the case and the party must encourage a vigorous interrogation of assumptions and conclusions arising from the research. This will require a cultural change so that the research findings and the assertions of individuals (regardless of role/position) are regarded as contestable. It will also require absolute clarity on confidentiality and consequences for those who feel the need for Twitter adulation.
- It is imperative that all research findings are made available in their entirety to the proposed Party Steering Group and this group should decide who else has access to confidential research findings.
- The nature of research conducted by the party needs to become more nuanced. The party should take advice from experts in a variety of research domains including, but not limited to, behavioural economics and data analytics.

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- It would be completely regressive of Fine Gael to subscribe to the viewpoint (held by a small number of individuals) that the conduct of research is unnecessary. The likelihood is that the types of research that need to be undertaken will have to expand and that the budget for research will have to be used more effectively.
- The Parliamentary Party and the Executive Council should get regular briefings on the research being conducted and they should have opportunities to provide feedback on these briefings.
- There needs to be a rigorous process of review of future research so that problems that arise from flawed assumptions, misinterpretation of data, missed connections and confirmation bias are eliminated.

## 6 Communication

### Internal

- Internal communication is fragmented and disjointed. The Steering Group should seek to address this problem by providing regular, reliable information to all elements of the party.
- All Fine Gael staff and representatives, regardless of position, must address the pervasive problem of timekeeping in the organisation. At the moment tardiness and unresponsiveness are contributing to poor organisational morale, poor interpersonal relationships and dysfunctional communication. The aphorism that “manners are small morals” should be widely understood and accepted.
- Each member of staff should have an annual review of performance and an annual set of targets.
- The management of staff performance must be conducted in a structured manner. This structure must be clearly communicated.
- The Chair of The Parliamentary Party should be tasked with creating clear lines of communication between Mount Street and the Parliamentary party.
- Parliamentary Party Meeting should have clearly recorded actions and a process to review progress on these items.
- The expertise of some members of the Parliamentary Party in relation to communication at constituency level should be shared.
- The Parliamentary Party and the General Secretary should meet at regular intervals to exchange information and views.
- The reforms underway in the workings of the Executive Council should be supported and the proposed external members appointed.
- Other issues relating to the composition of the Executive Council should be addressed - in particular participation by ex-officio members.



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### Organisation

- Fine Gael needs to develop a variety of communication strategies that target different sections of society.
- Communication with and from local authority members needs a complete overhaul.
- It needs to consult party members on what they seek from party membership.
- The effectiveness of generic newsletters should be reviewed.
- Each constituency needs to have an opportunity to outline the major issues for that constituency and to have a response to their submission.

### Media

- Notwithstanding the well-understood modes of engagement used by both Fine Gael and the media, it is opportune to use this period in government to attempt to change the relationship.
- Fine Gael should have a distinct engagement as a party with the media and the distinction between Fine Gael and government positions should be maintained.
- Regular, scheduled and comprehensive briefings on policy should be provided by Fine Gael.
- There should be far more formal and informal contact at all levels between Fine Gael and the media.
- Get external advice on how to more appropriately utilise the different new media platforms.

## 7 Party Membership

- Profiling of members and the establishment of membership groups based on interests and/or expertise should be undertaken in a systematic manner.
- Issue-based campaigning groups should be established and the composition of these groups should extend beyond party members.
- Moderated on-line issue groups should be established and supported centrally.
- A more systematic approach must be used to the gathering of feedback about party performance at constituency level.
- National Constituency Director Meetings should take place regularly so that the tactical considerations that influence Executive Council decisions on candidate selection/placement are well understood by all.
- At constituency level there should be an agreed annual programme that involves all local elected representatives, constituency members and key national figures.
- Decisions in relation to candidate selection and placement should be made at the earliest possible opportunity in order to maximise the promotion and profiling of candidates.
- New membership groupings as proposed in this review should have an input into candidate selection. This will require amendment to the party regulations.

## 8 Mobilisation of Elected Representatives

- At constituency and national level, an agreed annual work programme should involve **all** elected representatives.
- An agreed standardised format in which elected representatives and constituency chairs separately report on the annual work programme should be agreed. These reports should be submitted to the Executive Council.

Local Authority Members must be consulted in a more structured way and there must be feedback to them on issues they raise

### Parliamentary Party Effectiveness

- Parliamentary Party Meetings should develop the practice of agreeing actions and timelines and a mechanism for monitoring progress on these agreed actions.
- A protocol should be put in place regarding the conduct of Parliamentary Party Meetings.
- Each member of the parliamentary party should have an assigned association with specific national issues.
- All elected members of Fine Gael and candidates selected to contest elections should have professional development programmes available to them.
- An induction programme for all newly elected TDs and Local Authority members should be developed.

### Candidate Selection

- Multi-seat proportional representation causes inevitable intra-party difficulties. The Executive Council and The Party Steering Group must agree on the procedures to be used to adjudicate on disputes when the parties involved have been unable to resolve their differences. These procedures must be binding on all party members.
- Decisions on candidate selection must be made at the earliest possible opportunity.
- The identification of new potential new candidates for local and national elections must be an on-going project for the executive Council, notwithstanding the understandable unease this may cause among existing elected representatives.

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- Party support for new candidates is required in order to assist their progress.
- The support for candidates should extend beyond the election so that unsuccessful candidates have an opportunity to have their views on the conduct of the election heard and considered seriously.

## 9 Election Strategy

Fine Gael needs to approach the next election with

- A clear focus on its principles and policies;
- A team of candidates selected carefully and prepared thoroughly;
- Evidence that it has met its commitments;
- A persuasive vision of Ireland's future;
- An organisation motivated by this vision;
- And an electoral strategy that will communicate the vision and persuade voters of its merits.

The next election is always underway hence the division of recommendations here into two sections:

Phase1: The period immediately following the results of an election.

Phase 2: The formal election campaign.

### Phase One

- Review the party manifesto at a very early stage so that the priorities for FG that got lost in negotiations for government are consolidated into a single brief document used as the basis for discussion on party policy priorities.
- Use the publically available research which identifies weaknesses in the last campaign and plan future strategy.
- Commission appropriate research with both a national and constituency focus.
- Begin the process of candidate identification at the earliest possible opportunity.
- Communicate what Fine Gael is doing!
- Identify the weaknesses and gaps in internal party expertise which should be addressed with urgency.
- Address the gaps in organisational knowledge which contributed to less than optimal outcomes.
- Identify at a very early stage the key personnel who will prepare the party for the next election.
- Consider whether there is sufficient diversity in the composition of the group of key-decision makers in the Headquarters' and Advisors' groupings.

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- Establish who is responsible for each element of any future election campaign and ensure that a corresponding level of authority accompanies this responsibility. There should be no confusion about the source(s) of authority and decision-making.
- There should be a constant process of updating future election material so that it can be produced in a timely manner.
- Utilise a wide selection of spokespersons that are identified with specific national issues.
- All those who articulate Fine Gael policy in public, irrespective of the medium, should be required to undergo both communal and individual training.

### Phase Two

- Structure the brief period of the campaign with clearly developed approaches to the launch, middle period and conclusion.
- Pay particular attention to initial impact, developing momentum, dealing with the unexpected and providing a conclusion with impact.
- Constantly review the progress of the campaign and make adjustments.
- A policy-rich campaign should be communicated with absolute attention to the targeted audience.
- Gather feedback from a variety of sources and make timely adjustments.

## Section Two

### What to Say and What to Do

*“Anyone with gumption and a sharp mind will take the measure of two things: what’s said and what’s done.”*  
Seamus Heaney, Beowulf

In the course of conducting this review, I’ve had a unique opportunity to experience the immediate reaction of Fine Gael to an election result. Things did not go as well as the party hoped and disappointment was the prevailing emotion among those I met in the early days of this review. People were also exhausted and the physical and emotional toll of campaigning was evident. Some were angry, some bewildered and some very pragmatic about the need to deal with the reality in which the party found itself.

A variety of views were expressed on what could have been done differently and on how Fine Gael should change and prepare for the future. Emotions ranged from shock, anger and bewilderment through cautious pragmatism to determination to change what needed to change. There was a general conviction that Fine Gael could have done better and that in the future it would need to do better. All that could and should have been achieved was not realised. There was a real sorrow and frustration for friends and colleagues who had lost their seats and a great sense of uncertainty among staff who realised that inevitably jobs would be lost. Among those who lost their seats, I met people who were ruefully pragmatic and those who had a real sense of abandonment and many who felt both. There was a general acceptance that Fine Gael did not on this, or previous occasions, do a good job of keeping in touch with defeated candidates in both local and general elections. This should not occur in the future.

There was a widespread - though not unanimous - acceptance that Fine Gael had been insufficiently responsive to the real unease of people about their futures. A poll conducted close to the election elicited a clear distinction for many people between their acceptance that things were improving and their perception of their own position. For many people, positive change was not something they felt in their own lives. This was an important influencer on the national mood and decision-making.

Possible futures for Fine Gael were outlined to me, as were the complex forces that would shape them. They ranged across a wide spectrum but from most people I heard a willingness to interrogate old certainties and a realisation that Fine Gael needed to change. There was no appetite for finding sacrificial scapegoats. No one person lost the election for Fine Gael and its future will not be shaped and defined by any one individual.

I had not anticipated the prolonged period of negotiation that preceded the formation of the government. I originally planned to spend three or four weeks conducting the review and organised my timetable accordingly. First lesson for me - timetables are difficult in politics and timeliness is not commonplace. A month turned into three and I got the

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benefit of seeing and hearing how perspectives changed as time passed. My understanding of Fine Gael benefitted from this lengthier association. A personal accident further prolonged the completion of the report and for that I am entirely responsible!

I had a lot to learn. The party structure is complex and the elements operate rather like planets on parallel trajectories. Headquarters in Mount Street, the Trustees, the Parliamentary Party, the Taoiseach's Office, the Executive Council, the Ministers, the Advisors, the Local Authority Members, the Constituencies, the Branches - they are all working under a common banner but not necessarily always well aligned and coordinated. The language used by some of those talking to me was interesting - they talked about "over here" and "over there". The disconnect between various components of the party is fuelling a lot of frustration and the consequential lack of cohesion.

When things don't go as expected, there is an immediate search for answers. The Fine Gael people I met and those from outside the party had much in common in their analysis of the factors that led to the 2016 election results. It was clear to everybody to whom I listened that the results of an election do not arise from a single cause. It was also clear to everybody that across Europe a great deal of change was, and is, occurring in politics. The impact of the financial crisis, the recession and the subsequent austerity measures have led to inevitable political upheaval. But economic upheaval is not the only factor at play in this tempestuous political environment.

Ireland had changed a lot in five years. The conditions that created the 2011 electoral outcome are well catalogued; 2016 was an election in a different time and place. Voters went to the polls in 2011 determined to punish Fianna Fail. In 2016 voters went to the polls determined to register their frustration with the performance of the Government. The inevitability of both sets of electoral behaviour should act as a strong influence on future electoral strategy. To echo the warning of various financial watchdogs, "past performance is not a reliable guide to future performance"! In both elections we saw clear evidence of the contagion effect of fear and anxiety, the distrust of established political institutions and those associated with them, an over-reliance on stage-managed electoral performances and an electorate now disconnected from what they perceive as outmoded and staged "skirmishes". The electorate are tired of this form of engagement. So a vote in 2016 was a commentary on the election campaign; but it was more than that.

The first period in office of the last government was inevitably dominated by the economic crisis. By 2016, we had a more stable economic environment but as a people we were and are still bruised and damaged. The damage is more than economic. People have less confidence in their futures; they have less trust in institutions; they are angry because their expectations for themselves, their parents and their children are no longer secure. Generalised anxiety is evident everywhere and there are many people who feel that their anxieties are not understood. Above all, citizens are incensed if they are treated as passive consumers of promises and in many ways this is what a traditional election campaign offers. There is also little tolerance for what is perceived as inadequate responses to contemporary problems. There are major differences in how various groupings define socially accepted goals and in how they would generate the means to achieve these goals. Groupings that emerge in response to issues are not fixed entities and their very volatility makes the creation of political consensus very problematic. The sporadic appearance of politicians on doorsteps is not acceptable as a response; nor is the formulaic tit-for-tat of platitudinous public utterances.



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Here in Ireland and elsewhere politics has become more polarised, more aggressive and more judgmental. Complex issues are often represented as being amenable to simplistic binary solutions. This is a problem because the operation of a political system does require compromise and a willingness to work for incremental progress. The negative characterisation of compromise makes it more difficult for moderate voices to be heard and for consensus to emerge. Fine Gael will simply have to adapt to this new world order. To do so, it needs new thinking, new forms of engagement, new alliances and new structures. It must continue to provide space and recognition for the broad spectrum of opinion that has characterised the party since its establishment. It must grapple with the drift away from established political parties to a range of new parties and independent candidates. It must also ensure that what distinguishes Fine Gael from other centrist parties is clearly defined and communicated both inside and outside the party. It must attempt to shape public opinion by providing clear answers to the question, ‘Why vote for Fine Gael?’

Public opinion is now heavily influenced also by social media. Its messaging is instant and its impact pervasive. In relation to social media, I spent some time looking at the comments posted to, and about, some politicians (from various parties and independents) and political parties on a variety of platforms. There is a level of offensive aggression in many of the comments. This offensive aggression is not confined to politicians and it is clear that the anonymity afforded by a variety of social media platforms seems to incentivise the aggression of both the embittered and the apathetic towards a wide range of public and private individuals. A cursory look at comment in this sphere on the U.S. presidential election daily shows new depths. A feature of social media postings in Ireland, as elsewhere, is their characterisation of politicians as one-dimensional stereotypes and of politics as being inherently corrupt and self-serving. Countering this perception is an important ongoing piece of work that must be undertaken. This will require thoughtful work on how influence and credibility can be created and maintained and on the importance of an individual’s reference group.

The polarisation of public opinion is very understandable. The political response to it is not well developed. Public opinion is now much more influenced by those with whom we have contact in a variety of social spheres. “Experts” are not trusted. It was extraordinary but instructive to see how this distrust was manipulated in the Brexit “No” campaign. Michael Gove’s calculated and effective use of this distrust is encapsulated perfectly in his comment, “Britain has had enough of experts.” Traditional sources of institutional authority have lost power. More recently here in Ireland we can see the same forces at work in the dismissive attitude to the advice of the Attorney general to the Government. Fine Gael (and others) face a real challenge in establishing the credibility and trustworthiness of their views and the voices of independent reasoned and reasonable experts. Those who want the support of voters must build new relationships with them. These relationships must be built around shared approaches to problem-solving and an acknowledgement that voters are not to be treated as unthinking pawns in an episodic electoral drama. As consumers, voters expect and demand responsiveness from the political system; as capable and discerning citizens, they are entitled to parity of esteem in political discourse.

Translating responsiveness into practical measures is complex. The development of policy responses to complex problems is rarely amenable to simple binary answers. There are very few (if any) questions that can be posed so that a simple yes or no answer will suffice. We have experience of this difficulty in the framing of questions for referendums.

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The Brexit referendum provides ample evidence that people (by their own admission) do not necessarily respond in a referendum to the question posed: rather they use the opportunity to vent a more generalised response to a range of issues. On the other hand, the referendum in Scotland on independence did prove that citizens will become engaged to an extraordinary degree in a campaign that they believe in. The subsequent general election in Scotland then provided very clear evidence that the electorate were capable of distinguishing their positions on parties and electoral propositions. In light of this kind of evidence of thoughtful decision-making, Fine Gael needs to work very hard on enabling people to engage with issues that matter to them, often outside the confines of traditional party membership.

Structurally, Fine Gael needs to move with urgency if it is to become more responsive. The organisation needs to be more cohesive, its positioning on the political spectrum needs greater definition and its range of external relationships - both national and international - need to be strengthened. There needs, too, to be a rebalancing of the sources of decision-making. It must have clear ethical, behavioural and performance standards in all spheres and these must be followed and seen to be followed. Citizens have legitimate expectations about the trustworthiness and competence of those who represent them: Fine Gael must be constantly mindful of these expectations. Otherwise a lot of energy will continue to be dissipated on fragmented activity.

There is a large pool of external voluntary assistance and advice that is available to Fine Gael. In recent years, it would appear that it has been difficult for those who wish to assist Fine Gael to find a way of doing so and Fine Gael has not done enough to build a central web of voluntary expertise. This needs to change right now. This voluntary expertise needs to be woven into the fabric of the party at every level. The party will benefit from these wider perspectives and from the inevitable diversity it will bring. I cannot overstate how necessary it is for Fine Gael to reach out and take advantage of the wealth of experience and expertise that is available.

Complaints about communications in an organisation are often a proxy for a more generalised sense of dissatisfaction. And there are justified complaints within Fine Gael about communication and other cultural issues in the organisation. Some ground rules should be established on timeliness, courtesy and confidentiality. Project planning skills need to be honed. Lines of authority should be clarified and there need to be clear expectations about the performance of each person who works for Fine Gael in a paid or voluntary capacity. Inevitably there must also be a ramping up of mechanisms to address deficits in skills and performance.

Fine Gael does not control the media and the media does not control Fine Gael. Their mutual interests are poorly served at the moment. I encountered frustration on both sides and a lot of mutual suspicion. The only course of action open to Fine Gael is to address its own weaknesses. In particular it needs to be less defensive. The organisation also has a difficulty in that some of its elected members and some employees use the leaking of confidential information in an attempt to bolster their own profiles. Their actions are ill-judged and in reality a commentary on their own insecurities. Fine Gael should change its mode of interaction and provide far more commentary on its policies. It should not shy away from allowing individual idiosyncrasies to emerge. Teflon politics has no credibility and attempts to create Teflon politicians do not work. It is also fundamentally disrespectful of citizens and they react appropriately. Communication policy should move away from the tired and worn-out strategy of "messaging". The role of identity, conviction and belief needs to be at the kernel of communication policy. It should also ensure that those who communicate for the party have a clear focus on Fine Gael policy.

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The poet Maya Anglou wrote, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” As Fine Gael prepares for the next election, it should pay particular attention to the alignment of word and action - what to say and what to do. It must always remember the admiration felt in Ireland for those who “keep their word”.