

Pathways & Opportunities
A Review of Fine Gael, post-General Election
2016

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Introduction to Report

Following the general election in February 2016, the newly elected representatives for Fine Gael held their first Parliamentary Party (PP) meeting. At this meeting, An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, tasked six members of the PP with conducting a nationwide review of the general election and preparing a report to assist the Party with future strategic planning. It is intended that this publication will serve as a guiding document.

The PP review group was instructed to ascertain the views of a wide range of people involved in the 2016 campaign, review associated documentation, and prepare a review for publication in a timely fashion. There was a particular emphasis placed upon delivering the review before the summer recess, so as to better represent and implement the findings of the report.

The PP review group met with a wide variety of people involved in the campaign with the understanding that any comments made by individuals would be taken in confidence and that this report would not identify the individual participants. The PP review group encountered a wide range of perspectives and gathered many salient and noteworthy comments from individual interviewees.

The PP review group was subdivided and met at numerous regional locations. Over a period of six weeks, the review group conducted face-to-face interviews, and later followed up with further discussions. At the end of this process, the PP review group had an excess of 1,000 pages of notes collated.

In the preparation for and compiling of this report, particular focus was placed on the discussion of the future of Fine Gael.

The review group formed by the PP conducted constituency and regional surveys and interviews and has created a set of recommendations based on the information gathered.

Methodology

The PP review group conducted interviews with approximately 400 persons. These interviews were conducted using a number of methods, including face-to-face discussion, email, letter, online survey, and follow-up telephone calls. Emphasis was placed on obtaining a diverse and extensive sample of opinions during the course of the review.

To avoid leading or biased questions and encourage spontaneous responses, the PP attempted to pose neutral questions to the interviewees. Additionally, the review group attempted to neutralise any unintended bias by employing various methods of data collection, and the data collected was independently collated in order to remove further bias.

The categories of interviewees included members of the Party, chairs of constituencies and branches, members of strategy committees, Senators, County Councillors, City Councillors, general election candidates and TDs, as well as a number of former TD's and Senators who were and were not candidates in recent elections. No constituency was omitted from this process.

While it was clear from the commonality of responses given that many interviewees had similar opinions on the campaign and Fine Gael, the review group found the contributors to have approached the process in an honest and constructive manner, despite any disappointment they may have felt after the general election campaign.

Any recommendations, action points, or suggested timelines contained in the report are based on the information obtained in the review process and are meant to be a reflection of the suggestions and concerns brought forth.

Recommendations

After reviewing the information and concerns raised in the surveys conducted, the review team has compiled a set of recommendations that Fine Gael ought to undertake following the 2016 General Election. They fall under four large categories: Communications, Outreach and Membership, Media and Public Image, and Party Structure.

Communications

The review team recommends that Fine Gael make the following adjustments to improve its internal communication mechanisms:

1. Briefing documents need to be one page, and they need to be brief. Within briefings, documents can have links to expand if more information about an issue is required. Communication needs to be centralised and combined. TDs and Councillors should both receive the same briefings and should be made aware of any issues or progress that affects them.
2. Establish a “Pool of Knowledge” network that allows for local members, representatives, and ex-elected members with expertise or experience to contribute pertinent information and serve as a resource to the Party. This network could span various departments and areas of expertise and be a valuable resource for policy development.
3. All meetings, visits by An Taoiseach, Ministers and TDs to constituencies, and major events should be publicised well in advance and communicated to Regional Organisers so that they may relay the information to Councillors and local Fine Gael members. In the event of a Minister being unable to attend an event then the opportunity should be afforded to their constituency colleague(s) to attend in their stead.
4. Establish a regular Q&A session with the Chair of the PP and the media after PP meetings.

Outreach and Membership

To better improve outreach efforts and strengthen membership, the review team recommends that Fine Gael make the following changes:

1. Engage with YFG National Executive and develop a collaborative strategy that spans the country, not just urban centres.
2. In light of Young Fine Gael’s valuable contribution to the Party, we should involve Young Fine Gael more in regional and constituency campaigning, with the intent to increase their participation in regional activity.

3. By the end of September, there should be a meeting of the PP review group and YFG National Executive, at which further strategy and logistical recommendations may be made.
4. Focus groups should be made up of Party members and supporters, not paid commercial groups. Further to this, the PP should be used to examine the effectiveness or otherwise of centrally produced Party slogans and branding material.
5. Fine Gael needs to make it easier to become and stay a member of the Party. Meetings and information should be more accessible to members, and there should be more avenues for people to hear and be heard by upper levels of the Party. Individual members need to feel they are valued and do contribute to Fine Gael. We need to improve the ways we communicate with the membership and how we keep them informed.

Media and Public Image

The review team recommends that Fine Gael make the following adjustments to improve its relationship with the media and how the public perceives the Party:

1. Elected representatives, candidates, staff members, HQ executives, and the Party leader need to attend press conferences, media briefings and events on time. They must also give local and national media timely advance notice of news, etc. Furthermore, Fine Gael members must not try to control the media's agenda, but instead should attempt to look at reporting from an outsider's point of view to anticipate what counter-actions could be faced.
2. Communicating effectively with the public via the various media outlets is crucial for continued effective representation. It is the responsibility of the candidate/elected rep to inform the public accurately on political issues and to utilise the media as a conduit to that effect.
3. As often as possible, afford more opportunities to backbenchers to provide visible support for ministers and the government at press calls.
4. Fine Gael must temper its language and combat any negative perception of the Party that may exist. When communicating, representatives should avoid unnecessary political or technical jargon and address people in daily language. Furthermore, all levels of the Party should make an attempt to connect with people on everyday matters and local issues, and strive to be more relatable.
5. Fine Gael should avoid negative campaigning on a national level and work more to promote Fine Gael's successes. The Party should focus on promoting Fine Gael's strengths and achievements over highlighting the weaknesses of other parties or groups.

6. At press conferences, debates, and formal interviews, obvious stage-management needs to be decreased. Speakers should not appear stiff and uncomfortable when on stage; they should be prepared and briefed with necessary information. To aid with engagement, Fine Gael should hold more informal press briefings, such as the one given by An Taoiseach to members of the press after the election, which was considered an effective engagement strategy.

Party Structure

The review team's recommendations to improve the Party structure of Fine Gael have been broken down into four areas: HQ, Constituencies, Parliamentary Party, and Party Wide.

To improve the management and function of HQ, the review team suggests:

1. The HQ membership office acquires a full list of professions and experience of the members and that HQ should initiate the process of consulting with these members on policy matters that pertain to their field of expertise (see: "Pool of Knowledge" proposal).
2. The role of the Regional Organiser, while well executed and effective, needs to be more explicitly defined. Furthermore, a clear chain of command and straight-line accountability must be established and made known to all members of the Party.
3. HQ staff members need to get out of the office regularly for canvassing in order to maintain a connection with the general public, the local needs of constituencies, and the work of our elected representatives.
4. The convention process should be re-structured to ensure that the general membership understand the rationale behind the decision of the National Executive when possible. Directives from HQ should be given well in advance of any convention and should fully explain any action that needs to be taken.

To improve party structure within constituencies, the review team suggests:

1. Councillors meet with all of their TDs and Senators on a quarterly basis. The specific agenda of each of these meetings should be set by the Councillors. The focus of these meetings will be to discuss local issues, foster greater communication between Oireachtas members and Councillors, and develop means for Councillors, TDs, and Senators to address the needs of their constituents. Prior to these meetings, a briefing document should be distributed to all representatives that will be in attendance.
2. There needs to be more frequent regional meetings for members with set dates. The subject matters should vary, but an agenda must be established prior to any meeting. The goal should be to tap into the talent of the membership and address local concerns. Every effort should be made by elected representatives to attend these meetings.

To improve relations within the Parliamentary Party and increase its performance, the review team suggests:

1. Appoint a PP Liaison/General Secretary/Manager and make the role a paid position. This position would be responsible for coordinating the implementation of review findings, helping the PP run smoothly, maximising PP effectiveness, and ensuring timely replies from Ministers to backbenchers.
2. Establish a regular Q&A session between the PP Chairman and the media after PP meetings.
3. Give backbenchers the opportunity to accompany Ministers to general meetings and events.
4. Each government department should have several shadow members to support their role with media and members.
5. Set up a PP Topical Issue Lottery, based on 20 minute slots, to discuss topical items and issues. The format should be as follows: a line from members followed by a response from a Minister. Response should take place within the PP or within 48 hours of the end of the PP. This topical lottery must be decided at the Think-In in September.
6. Ministers should conduct a post-Cabinet meeting briefing for the PP. This briefing should be organised by the new PP liaison/chair and serve to keep the PP informed of events. Briefings should happen on a Tuesday, preferably before Dáil business starts.

To improve overall party structure and foster better interactions between all levels of Fine Gael, the review team suggests:

1. The Party should take into account recommendations for changing the format of branch and constituency meetings, where applicable. The attendance of Ministers and the specific subject matter to be discussed should be agreed upon in advance of these meetings to encourage wider participation. The PP would facilitate this integration and participation.
2. Two, party-wide meetings (like the one in Athlone post-GE 2016) should be held every year: one in September and the other in April. These meetings ought to be attended by all levels of the Party, including the Party Leader, Oireachtas members, Councillors, and grassroots members.
3. Ministers must attend at least two quarterly general meetings per annum. Shadow PP members should attend meetings when a Minister is not available on a given subject in their portfolio. In addition, there should be an obligation on a Minister to attend constituency AGMs, as there are only 40 constituencies and this is an achievable goal.

4. Before a constituency general meeting, there should be an all-branches gathering in separate parts of the hotel, at least 1.5 hours before the general meeting starts, where appropriate. At these general meetings, attendees should evaluate what strategies and policies have worked in their constituency and later present these findings at the National Conference or Ard Fheis.
5. HQ needs to facilitate more regular, formal training sessions for a cross section of members, including Councillors, TDs, officers, and constituency chairs. These training sessions could be held twice a year at the general Party meetings. They could take the format of the training sessions that were afforded to GE16 potential candidates, as these sessions were widely praised.
6. At the Ard Fheis and National Conference, Fine Gael must reduce stage management and remove promotional stands. Members should be allowed more time to interact with Oireachtas members and Councillors. Where possible, these meetings should be structured more like the meeting in Athlone.
7. Invite guest speakers from external states and industries to speak at the Ard Fheis, and focus on making the Ard Fheis about the members. The Ard Fheis should take the form of an integrated, engaged gathering of the Fine Gael family.
8. Endeavour to implement the report recommendations, as the review group has heard from all levels of the Party.
9. In advance of election campaign, the Party members should be allowed to give a second opinion on literature, slogans, and other campaign material.
10. Fine Gael's manifesto should be a living document and used as an opportunity to say what Fine Gael would do if the Party had more time available or if it were governing alone. This document would be managed by the PP through the PP manager. Familiarity with the manifesto should be standard practice throughout the term of office of the Party. If elected, the program for government should mirror the manifesto as closely as possible.

Implementation Timeline

JULY 2016

- PP Review Team presents report to An Taoiseach

AUGUST 2016

- Chair of PP, Fine Gael General Secretary, Fine Gael Press Office, Leader, Deputy Leader, and PP Review Team meet to discuss report recommendations
- Chair of PP initiates recruitment of Party Manager
- Chair of PP considers corporate team building event for Think-In

SEPTEMBER 2016

- PP Think-In in September 2016
 - Chair of PP gives update on recruitment of PP Manager
 - PP Review Team presents report and discussion thereof follows
- First PP meeting post recess
 - Chair of PP invites submission from YFG regarding specific YFG related recommendations
 - Chair of PP establishes new PP liaison team to monitor progress of implementation of recommendations and to discuss policy areas that need to be addressed
 - Team composed of two TDs, two Senators, the Chair of PP, a representative from the Department of An Taoiseach, and a representative from the Press Office
 - PP liaison team changed annually after summer recess
 - PP Manager in place by the end of September
- Chair of PP, Manager, and PP liaison team meet with YFG to discuss submissions
- Chair of PP, Manager, and PP liaison team meet with HQ, Regional Organisers, and FG Press Office to discuss progress of recommendations and hear HQ's plan to implement recommendations from the report
- Chair of PP meets with Press Office to discuss recommendations of report associated with media
- Press Office condenses briefing documents' format and changes audience

- Condenses An Taoiseach's weekly message to become a short personalised message from An Taoiseach and a one-page briefing document for members

- Press Office moves to replace commercial focus groups with groups comprised of Party members
- Chair of PP establishes monthly, "48-hour" Party policy discussion periods, during which groups meet for discussion in multiple 20 to 30 minute intervals to focus on particular areas of importance such as: information sharing, policy discussion, and relevant topical issues
 - Members of PP form a group to exchange findings from these discussions
- Chair of PP reforms organisation of elected representatives' visits to constituencies
- Chair of PP establishes formal Q&A with media post PP meetings

OCTOBER 2016

- Original PP Review Team meets with Chair of PP and new PP Manager to discuss progress and implementation of recommendations
- HQ undertakes the following:
 - Creation of a "Pool of Knowledge" network to access resources and expertise within the Party and to foster a more inclusive approach to policymaking
 - Review of communication methods with members with focus on getting information to and filtering information from the membership
 - Exploration of party structure reform based on report recommendations, specifically looking at the role of Regional Organisers and at regions' and constituencies' structures
- HQ organises new diary for the year incorporating proposed meetings and training in recommendations
- HQ explores report recommendations regarding the Ard Fheis
- Chair of PP initiates process whereby PP members are invited to become shadow supporters of various departments
- Chair of PP sets up post-Cabinet meeting brief and topic lottery format for PP meetings

NOVEMBER 2016

- HQ reviews operation procedure for conventions

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- HQ establishes system to send office support staff out canvassing on a regular basis
- Chair of PP reviews suggestions in report recommendations regarding manifesto
- Chair of PP meets with HQ to review the role of the national executive

JANUARY 2017

- Chair of PP organises team building event for the PP

FEBRUARY 2017

- Meeting between PP liaison team, HQ General Secretary, Taoiseach, Party Chair, current PP liaison team, and Manager

Acknowledgements

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Furthermore, we would also like to acknowledge with much appreciation the role of Brown University student Samantha Kiernan, who completed a large body of clerical work, review, and analysis for this report.

Your contributions allow us to consistently work towards improving Fine Gael at all levels and ensure the Party is best placed to meet the challenges that lie ahead. We look forward to working closely with you during the implementation of these recommendations.

Yours in appreciation,

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