

The next Irish Government - a new chapter in the Republic's parliamentary evolution?

THE crystallising of debate following the General Election around whether the majority of TDs will countenance Sinn Fein entering Government prefaces a new stage in the political evolution of the Republic. The outcome of the last election resulted in a move towards more parliamentary influence in the Dail, with the allied role of the main Opposition party, Fianna Fail engaging in a Confidence and Supply arrangement.

Now the election has thrown up maths which make it inevitable that the two main parties must coalesce in alliance with other TDs, if they are to avoid the necessity to bring SF into the Cabinet. Even without debating the concerns around the view expressed by the Garda Commissioner Drew Harris that Sinn Fein is answerable to the army council of the IRA, it is the case that SF TDs interpret their mandate as TDs differently from other TDs, certainly independents, and TDs in other Dail parties. SF would not deny this; indeed they see it as a strength of their party, which they see as 'a movement', and as not just a party. This would also be confirmed by the single TD of another small party, (Aontu) whose leader was expelled from SF on foot of his refusal to act in denial of his religious beliefs as per the party dictate. There is copious evidence for doubting SF's commitment to the version of parliamentary democracy shared by the majority of other parties in the Dail, along with the allied Common Law fabric that the Republic of Ireland's constitution and tradition is built on.

These issues have so far been avoided in economic commentary by forecasters in the past month, including the OECD, and the major credit

rating agencies. They may not have commented on it, but there may be no coincidence in the fact that they had been reducing their forecasts for Irish growth, before the impact of Covid 19 which in itself will result in Ireland participating in a sharp recession in the middle two quarters of 2021 at least.

How Ireland will recover from that in the medium term will reflect the success of the new Government in uniting the country in a liberal democratic consensus. Such a consensus could be fundamentally based on an agreement that would see parliamentarians working to a liberal democratic model, as classically envisaged by Edmund Burke, whose exposition of the role of parliamentary representatives was set out in the classic text on virtual representation (see panel opposite).

The new Dail and Government is likely to operate in an environment where the official opposition will be SF. This spurs the fear that, because of the 'tweddledum-tweedeldee' rotating pattern of Irish politics since independence in 1921, Irish parliamentary politics could divide in future along lines that did not see equal commitment to liberal democratic principles on both sides of the House.

That need not happen - and won't, if a realisation grows in the next four years that representative democracy is the voters' choice over the possibility of the Dail being relegated to a mere 'congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests; which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates' - the vision of Sinn Fein, Marx, and other populist ideologies of the 20th and 21st centuries.

- Ken O'Brien

Edmund Burke on the role of parliamentarians in a liberal democracy*

**Speech to the Electors of Bristol, (1774)* the first definitive statement of virtual representation in parliament, as distinct from delegated democracy

"It ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion, high respect; their business, unremitting attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own. But his unbiassed opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure; no, nor from the law and the constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

"My worthy colleague says, his will ought to be subservient to yours. If that be all, the thing is innocent. If government were a matter of will upon any side, yours, without question, ought to be superior. But government and legislation are matters of reason and judgment, and not of inclination; and what sort of reason is that, in which the determination precedes the discussion; in which one set of men deliberate, and another decide; and where those who form the conclusion are perhaps three hundred miles distant from those who hear the arguments? "To deliver an opinion, is the right of all men; that of constituents is a weighty and respectable opinion, which a representative ought always to rejoice to hear; and which he ought always most seriously to consider. But authoritative instructions; mandates issued, which the member is bound blindly and implicitly to obey, to vote, and to argue for, though contrary to the clearest conviction of his judgment and conscience,--these are things utterly unknown to the laws of this land, and which arise from a fundamental mistake of the whole order and tenor of our constitution.

"Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests; which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates; but parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole; where, not local purposes, not local prejudices, ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole. You choose a member indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not member of Bristol, but he is a member of parliament. If the local constituent should have an interest, or should form an hasty opinion, evidently opposite to the real good of the rest of the community, the member for that place ought to be as far, as any other, from any endeavour to give it effect."