

## **Don't Want to Sing Those Half-Party Blues No More (In the End There Can Be Only Two)**

**BREAKING NEWS - Press Association (1 Hour ago) Gilmore claims victory in Irish local elections.** The Leader of the Irish Labour Party claimed victory in Ireland's local election. Speaking at a press conference with the leaders of Sinn Fein and the Green Party, he called yesterday's result a 'breakthrough not only for the parties involved in the Common Cause, but for all people who want an alternative to the discredited politics of the civil war parties'. The Common Cause – a loose arrangement between the Labour Party, Sinn Fein and the Green Party – caused a major upset by getting more votes than either the two larger parties, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael ([see more](#))

In launching his successful bid for the leadership of the Labour Party, Deputy Eamon Gilmore laid out his primary objective in unmistakable terms:

*'Labour should break free of, and reject, the "half party" limit which others impose on us - and which, sometimes, we inflict on ourselves.'*

Just to make sure that everyone knows he was serious he set targets for Labour: 30 seats by 2012 and seriously contesting every constituency by 2017 (or 40 seats).

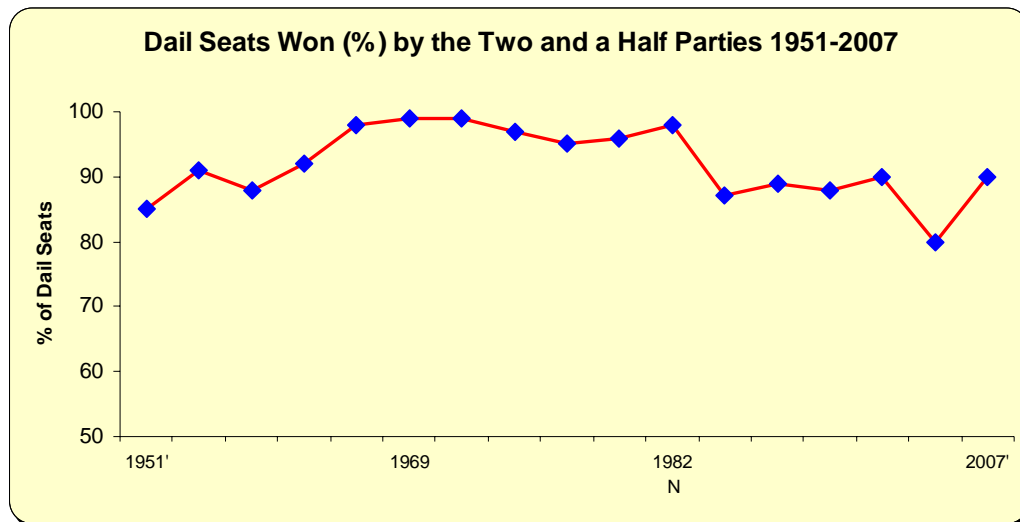
This is not just about winning a few extra seats or getting into the next government. Mr. Gilmore's challenge goes to the heart of Labour's historical underachievement and constitutes a fundamental assault on the very structures of electoral competition. If the Labour leader is successful, the political landscape will be profoundly reshaped to the point where it will be utterly unrecognisable.

Good lord, where do we start?

### **Half-full, Half-empty**

Let's first get a handle on this 'half-ness'. Historically, it arose to describe a situation whereby Irish electoral competition pitted a single party - Fianna Fail - against a Fine Gael-led government of which Labour was a necessary, albeit minor, component (hence the ½ in the 2 ½ party system).

This 'system' has remained remarkably stable since 1951. True, we have had the rise and occasional decline of several smaller parties – Workers' Party, Democratic Left, the PDs, the Greens and Sinn Fein - not to mention numerous independents. But throughout, the two-and-a-half parties have consistently grabbed an overwhelming proportion of seats.



During the period from 1951 to 2007, the two-and-a-half parties averaged 91% of all Dail seats. Though recent elections have seen a decline from the near monopoly of seats during 1960s and 70s, in 2007 the two-and-a-half parties took 90% of the seats – continuing a long-term trend. Labour’s half-ness, therefore, is chronic and endemic – suggesting that Mr. Gilmore’s stated objective will not be easily achieved.

The only significant modification within the system was brought about by Fianna Fail’s abandonment of anti-coalitionism arising from three successive elections where they failed to form a single-party government, and Labour’s decision to break their chronic dependency on Fine Gael. These two, inter-related events have meant that, since 1992, Labour is capable of entering either a Fianna Fail or Fine Gael-led government. But the electoral logic remains stubbornly resistant: Irish voters can choose, and only choose, between governments led by the larger right-wing parties. And Labour remains the “half” component whatever the arrangement.

### **Self-Inflicted**

There is another debate about how Labour became a half-party: agricultural dominance, small employee base, a confessional state, the ‘national question’. There is no need to go through these arguments here, except to note that none of them pertain today – certainly not with the same force as in earlier decades. If Labour continues to accept its half-party status, it does so because it chooses not to do otherwise.

So why does this truncated status persist? Because Labour doesn’t contest all elections throughout the State? All local wards? All Presidential elections? All European seats? All Dail seats (not seriously, anyway)? It’s true that they don’t but – and here we’re in a chicken-and-egg situation – this could be just as much a result of their ‘half-ness’ as its cause.

Simply put, Labour is a half-party because the public accepts that it will not lead a government. Even more disillusioning, most Party members themselves accept this situation – so much so that there is no concerted or organised attempt to even construct a strategy, no matter how long term, no matter how conceptual (even as an academic exercise), to figure how they could arrive at a different point. Full parties – big hairy-chested parties that bully everyone on the beach – are the ones that make Taoiseach. Half parties (and third and quarter-parties) are the political weaklings

who get sand kicked in their face and are grateful to be let out on the waves periodically.

To end its half-ness, to become a 'full party', Labour has to strive for something it has never done before: it must present itself to the electorate as the viable and realistic leader of an alternative government. Anything less will continue to trap Labour in its half-ness.

### **In Europe, Three's a Crowd**

Let's survey the evidence from other European countries. While the fortunes of parties rise and fall, there is something that has remained constant since the war – in any particular country there are two, and only two parties, who are ever in a position to lead a government. As fragmented as some of their systems are, with a multiplicity of parties represented in parliament and even in Government, it is almost like an iron law: there are only two parties who will lead the government.

<b>Country</b>	<b>The Two Parties That Will Lead a Government</b>
<b>Sweden</b>	Social Democrats / Moderate Party
<b>Greece</b>	Panhellenic Socialist Movement / New Democracy
<b>Germany</b>	Social Democrats / Christian Democrats
<b>Spain</b>	Socialist Party / Popular Party
<b>Denmark</b>	Social Democrats / Liberals
<b>Austria</b>	Social Democrats / People's Party
<b>Netherlands</b>	Labour Party / Christian Democrats

When one examines almost all other European countries one finds that either (a) there are historically only two parties that have ever led a Government (e.g. Germany) or (b) in any particular election, there are only two parties that will lead the Government. We'd expect this in first-past-the-post systems – such as the UK. That this occurs in countries with proportional representation is particular noteworthy.

This is not to say that all the leading political parties remain constant. There is a fair degree of supplanting. In Sweden, the Moderate Party overtook the Centre Party to become the lead party of the Right. In Denmark, the Liberals supplanted the Christian People's Party. In Austria the Freedom Party briefly surged ahead of the

Christian Democrats (and just as quickly faded). In France there has been a considerable fluidity on the Right where parties were founded by personalities all claiming the Gaullist mantle.

There will, of course, from time to time be temporary exceptions, but these happen in unique circumstances – the meltdown of the Christian Democrats in Italy, the fragmentation of parties along linguistic lines in Belgium. But eventually it settles down into a two-party race, with a number of other parties jockeying for coalition places.

So if there is an underlying logic in European political competition from which the Irish system cannot escape, if there is inevitable bipolarity to governmental contests, then there is only room for two parties to offer themselves as 'leaders'. Therefore, if Labour wants to become a full party, one of the two larger parties must give way.

### **Who will be the Supplanted?**

Which of the two parties is likely to give way? Employing a demographic slide-rule, it could be argued that it would be Fianna Fail. Of course, progressives would be maximising support among its base constituencies (e.g. environmentalists, public sector workers, social liberals, left-republicans, community activists, etc.). But, as well, future growth will be specifically grounded in the C2DE category – the 'manual' working class.<sup>1</sup> That is the core element of Fianna Fail's broad class support base. As Labour increases, so Fianna Fail will falter – as happened in Dublin in 1969 or on a larger scale in 1992.

However, politics is not a slide-rule. One must also look at the dynamic within and between political parties. At this level, it is clear that Fianna Fail is unlikely to give way or be reduced to a half-party status. It has been in power for over 70% of the period since it first entered government in 1932. It has successfully transformed itself – from the party of native industrialisation in the 1930s, to the party of foreign investment in the 1960s, to the party of social partnership in the 1980s to - today, the party of the Celtic Tiger economy. It has deep roots in society that will not easily be severed. Over the years the Left has been predicting the demise of Fianna Fail, and it has always been premature.<sup>2</sup>

There's another interesting dynamic. Fianna Fail is not solely reliant upon any one party to achieve office. They have coalesced with Labour, the PDs, the Greens, and a variety of independents. They are adept at coalition-building – not just in parliament but in civil society. This assured flexibility gives them considerable manoeuvring room.

How different for Fine Gael. If Fianna Fail is one of the most successful parties in Europe then Fine Gael, as the main opposition party, is one of the least successful. Since its formation in 1933 it has been in office for only 18 out of 75 years. But, more to the point, Fine Gael is solely reliant upon Labour to lead a government. It's not that they are inflexible: they have coalesced with Democratic Left while making it clear prior to the last election that both Greens and the PDs were acceptable partners. However, without Labour, they cannot hope to lead a government. Were

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<sup>1</sup> In 2007, Fianna Fail won 43% of the C2DE class (compared to 9% for Labour).

<sup>2</sup> Back in the 1980s a Labour TD said to me that we need not fear Fianna Fail in the future because its base was rooted in the elderly vote and that literally that support would 'die off'. Since then Fianna Fail has never been defeated in a general election and in 2007 it received 35% of the under 24-age vote – nearly three times that of Labour.

Labour to permanently withdraw support, it is very hard to see Fine Gael ever recapturing that office.

But it is not only this dependency that makes them particularly vulnerable. Fine Gael's rightward shift can open up new ground for progressives. Of course, Fine Gael will play to a populist tune when it suits them (e.g. the recent Dail motion calling for a doubling of the capitation grant). But they just can't help their natural inclinations as when Leo Vradruker called for real wage cuts for those on the national minimum wage.

Fianna Fail will remain a dominant player for some time to come. It is Fine Gael that is the lead candidate for supplanting (not that they are going to disappear – there is always room for a conservative critique of the Fianna Fail project, especially with the PDs on the wane). In order to end its half-party status, Labour must overtake Fine Gael as the lead alternative. In football parlance, we know Fianna Fail will be in the finals but Labour and Fine Gael will have to slug it out with each other to earn the right to play Fianna Fail.

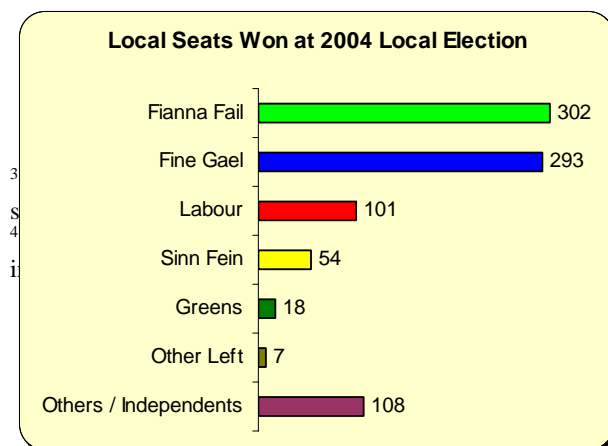
### Enda's New Target

Supplanting Fine Gael? How much easier it might have been following the 2002 election. Labour trailed Fine Gael by a mere 11 seats – the smallest gap ever with the second largest party (closer than in 1992). Fine Gael was in long-term decline – its vote had nearly halved since 1982, falling from 40% to 22%. They lost an astonishing 39 seats.

On the other hand, with a new leader and following the anti-war protests, Labour was on the up – rising to 22% in the polls by May 2003, pushing Fine Gael into third place for the first time in its history. The total number of 'progressive' TDs (Labour, Greens, Sinn Fein and Left Independents) outnumbered Fine Gael in the Dail. And with the Left's most popular politician – Michael D. Higgins, TD – indicating he would challenge Fianna Fail in the upcoming Presidential election<sup>3</sup> - all the signs pointed to a serious challenge for power.

Today the Left is in a different place and there's little point rehashing old debates. Strategy starts from where you are, not from where you were or would like to be. And, to be honest, it's not a great place. Neither Labour, the Greens nor Sinn Fein made the advances they hoped for or expected in 2007. Fine Gael's increase in seats was the largest in their history<sup>4</sup>. Recent polls show that since the election they – not the progressive parties - have been the beneficiaries of Fianna Fail's small decline. And they haven't been resting on their laurels.

Enda Kenny, TD, has been setting new goals. Shortly after the last election he declared a new target – to lead the largest party after the next election. This is both ambitious and achievable, providing a focus around which he can unite his party. This is an inspired motivational tactic.



The local elections will be the first test, for to become the largest party at the local level

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s but a large part of this was due to the s, 2007 was Fine Gael's biggest increase.

would be a strong platform from which to launch the party's drive to become the largest party at national level.

Fine Gael is in within striking distance of this target – trailing Fianna Fail by 9 seats or 1%. The implications for Labour and the Left are enormous. If Fine Gael is successful, they would reinforce their claim to lead an alternative government. The public and the media would settle down for a long run-in to what would be a contest between the two right wing parties. Other parties would struggle to be noticed. Labour, in particular, would be reduced to explaining (or not explaining) which party they would support in government. The half-party's spokespersons will only be half heard. Their party leader will have to be content debating other half-parties. Their policies will only be half-read (they'll have to be negotiated anyway – and with parties that don't share their politics). Whether Labour moves 'left', Sinn Fein moves 'centre' or the Greens manage to maintain autonomy will be immaterial – because it will be half-party time, again.

### **Picking the Ground**

It's like an unstoppable train hurtling down the track. Fine Gael needs only the slightest shift to become the largest party at local level. Its current level in the polls suggests they can achieve this while the progressive parties seem stuck in neutral. How can the Left derail Fine Gael, make gains and come out the other side of the locals the winner?

For armies, selecting the terrain upon which they engage the enemy is a fundamental rule in tactics. You don't fight the enemy advancing uphill, or fight in a terrain where there is only one escape or marshy ground if you're relying on speed. Picking the ground is absolutely essential to creating the basis for success.

Fine Gael has staked out its terrain – to win more local seats than any other party. This is a better ground than the popular vote. In 2004 they trailed Fianna Fail by 1% in seats, but by over 4% in popular vote. They could end up running second but still lead in seats – thus claiming 'victory'.

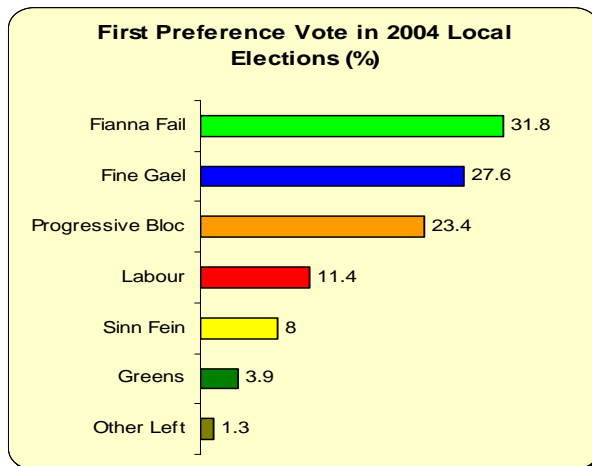
In this race their only competitor is Fianna Fail. Last time out Fine Gael won three times as many seats as Labour, and over four times as many as the combined Sinn Fein/Greens. Even with the three progressive parties combined, Fine Gael leads by 120 seats – a difficult gap to bridge in one outing. Fine Gael has been quite astute in picking its ground. If the Left fight the next election on Fine Gael's terms they will lose. They have to find a better terrain. This is complicated by the fact that none of the three progressive parties has a national organisational infrastructure. For instance, outside Dublin, Labour is unrepresented in over 60% of the local government wards, while Sinn Fein and the Greens fare even worse. This is compounded by the fact that where the left is strongest there are fewer seats and, conversely, in areas where they are weakest there are a disproportionate number of seats.

Local Authority Councils: The Number of Electors Per Council Seat			
Councils Where Left is Weak		Councils Where Left is Strong	
Leitrim	Roscommon	South Dublin	Fingal
1,165	1,843	6,912	6,044

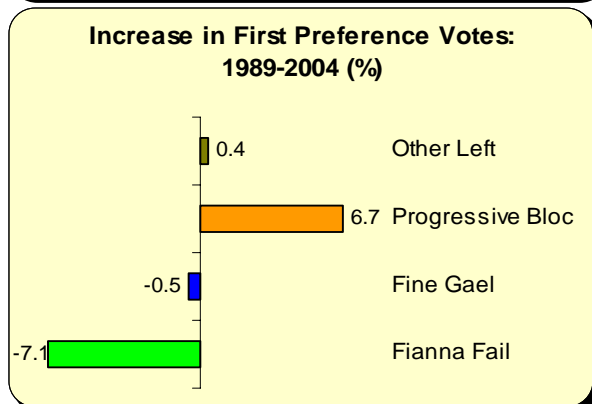
So skewed is the representative base in local government that South Dublin and Leitrim have almost the same number of Councillors, but the former has seven times more voters. In other words, Fine Gael wins fewer votes than the combined progressive parties but gets more seats.

Combined Seats and Votes in 2004: Leitrim, Roscommon, South Dublin and Fingal		
Party	Seats	Votes
Fine Gael	26	44,484
Progressive Parties	24	79,790

Therefore, the ground which progressives should fight is that of the popular vote. When we examine the popular vote a different picture emerges.



Yes, Fine Gael still leads the three progressive parties individually. But when one combines the progressive vote the gap narrows considerably – to a mere 4%.

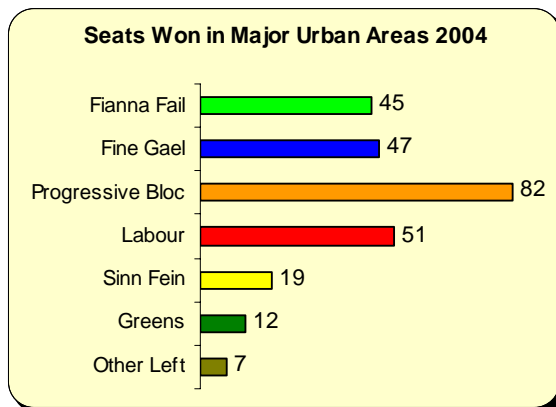


The simple fact is that if the three major progressive parties worked together, they could overtake Fine Gael and become the second-largest political grouping in the Republic. Full stop. It won't be easy. But to close a gap of 4.2% is not impossible. How do we know this? We merely have to look at the last local elections.

The ironic thing is that, following the last local election, Fine Gael declared itself the winner – not only because of its European gains but because they closed the local seat gap with Fianna Fail to single figures. This despite the fact that their first preference vote actually

declined.<sup>5</sup>

But there's more. In the major urban areas<sup>6</sup> the progressive parties were actually the largest bloc in both seats and votes.



Any objective assessment would have shown that Fine Gael (and, indeed, the combined Right) lost ground to the parties representing progressive politics.

But that story was not told because the 'progressive bloc' has no coherence, no public identity, no narrative. That it may exist as an abstraction is of little value until it is made concrete, specific – until we make a story of it.

### The Progressive Story

Working together, Labour, Sinn Fein and the Greens could transform electoral competition – at least at local level. They could beat Fine Gael into third place nationally – at least in first preference votes. They could dominate – in both first preferences and seats – the major urban areas (they do already). They could, on a good day, even challenge Fianna Fail for top spot (though let's remember, the first battle is against Fine Gael; anything else is icing). They could start to make Irish politics that bit more interesting, that bit more complex, that bit more exciting.

But they have to find some way to link each with each other, maintaining independence while still projecting an identifiable quality.

The first obstacle we hit in this task is the problem of 'alliances'. In the aftermath of the last election, Eamon Gilmore announced that Labour would not enter into future alliances. This was wholly understandable. While the members supported the party leadership's proposed Mullingar Accord at the 2005 Annual Conference, in truth it had little choice: rejection would have been a severe, possibly fatal, blow to the leadership, leaving the party in crisis (much as what happened when the Party rejected Michael O'Leary's similar proposal in 1982). It was, for most party members, an extremely reluctant and sometimes distasteful 'alliance'. So when Mr. Gilmore, as a candidate for party leadership, called for no 'alliances', it was with this one-sided, politically contradictory and ultimately self-defeating arrangement foremost in mind.

This 'no alliances' need not be a bar to reaching some understanding with other progressive parties in the run-up to the election. Already, Labour has worked with Sinn Fein over the agency workers' private members motion. Labour's last annual conference unanimously passed a motion calling for co-operation with other political

<sup>5</sup> Fine Gael achieved a triumph of spin immediately following the 2004 elections. They declined in first preference vote and gained a mere 16 seats. They did manage to close the gap with Fianna Fail – from 105 to 9 seats. But that was due to Fianna Fail dropping an incredible 81 seats. The seat gain for the combined progressive parties, however, was 61 seats. That puts Fine Gael's 'victory' in perspective.

<sup>6</sup> The four Dublin authorities, Cork, Limerick, Waterford and Galway.

parties on issues of mutual concern. Whatever about the highly contentious word 'alliance', it is clear that 'working together' is still very much on Labour's agenda.

So what might be an obstacle need not be, if Labour sees that this 'working together', this 'understanding', is in its best interests (and ultimately, all tactics are about interests, for all parties). Therefore, the question revolves around 'what's in it for us?'

**(a) *The Greens***

What's in it for the Greens – already in, but not of, a Fianna Fail-led government? The main benefit to working with other progressive parties in the local elections is that it gives them one more chance to reinforce their autonomy. They can further detach themselves from Fianna Fail, allowing their candidates to run without the usual problems associated with an incumbent Government party. This selective detachment on the part of a minority party in Government is not new – the PDs pursued it with great skill under the chairpersonship of Michael McDowell during the first Fianna Fail-PD coalition, most notably providing tacit support for Mary Robinson's presidential candidacy. However, an arrangement at local level with Labour and Sinn Fein would break new ground, potentially resulting in increased publicity and support for the Greens. It certainly would prove that they are not a 'business-as-usual' party.

**(b) *Sinn Fein***

Sinn Fein's disappointing performance in the last election has raised crucial questions regarding its future direction. Does it firmly establish itself on the Left or does it manoeuvre to a more centrist ground, leaving them flexible enough to join Fianna Fail or even a Fine Gael-led government? One answer would be to join Labour and the Greens in a new arrangement, however temporary, for the local elections. It could not only find a place in a grouping which would give it more publicity (they would, after all, be an integral part of driving Fine Gael into third place – something I suspect Sinn Fein members would relish); it might help it break out of its electoral ghettos, tapping into new electoral bases without losing its more traditional support. It wouldn't answer all the questions it is asking itself, but being part of a group 'victory' at the local elections might point the way to new answers.

**(c) *Labour***

For Labour, such an arrangement has obvious benefits. It would be the leading element in a grouping that could potentially 'win' the next local elections, and set itself up to contest Fianna Fail in the finals. As the largest party, it would expect to gain proportionately more seats, as its organisational infrastructure – the breadth of candidates it could field in wards – is the largest among the progressive parties. It is not sectarian, or disrespectful to either the Greens or Sinn Fein, to suggest that - were progressives to ever mount a serious challenge for power - Labour would be the largest party. However, it is also clear that such a challenge will need all three parties and any arrangement between them must be marked by respect and cooperation, not dictat and deference.

There is much to offer all three parties in such an arrangement. What it will take is vision and ambition – the vision to see that, working together, the three parties have more to gain than separately; and the ambition to make the vision reality.

**The Common Cause**

So what kind of arrangement? What can

- a) maintain each party's independence – to campaign on its policies, with its own manifestos, pursuing its own candidate strategies, taking seats wherever they can find them – even from each other; while at the same time
- b) present a common face to the electorate, where each party would reap the benefit, the kudos, the publicity arising out of the victory of landing in second place and even challenging Fianna Fail for first place in the popular vote?

The great thing about local elections is that they offer considerable flexibility. There are as many local alliances as there are councils, especially since local government has little power. 'Party politics' rarely features. So a 'national alliance' would have little if any impact on local alliances which are more determined by the divvy up of offices and committees.

However, a common set of principles can be used to inform the electorate of a new political understanding between the three parties. In this respect, there would be few if any programmatic obstacles to the three progressive parties coming together in a 'Common Cause'. Such principles would include commitments to pursue:

- Decentralisation of power to local levels as part of a wider democratisation of decision-making
- Reinvesting local powers from the management back into the hands of elected councillors
- The development of a range of environmental, social and enterprise policies to generate wealth and prosperity at local level

These principles are broad enough to allow the individual parties to put forward their own policies. However, the very fact that progressives come together, coupled with a declaration that, where possible, the three parties commit to working together on local councils to actualise these principles would tell a new, innovative and exciting story.

Imagine the political impact if Eamon Gilmore, John Gormley and Gerry Adams came together, putting their names to a 'Common Cause', committing their respective parties to pursue an agreed set of principles at local level. There would be no need for transfer pacts (in the last election there was no formal transfer pact between Fine Gael and Labour – it wasn't necessary), no joint policy making, no joint manifesto. These would remain the prerogatives of the individual parties.

But the impact would be strong. It would infuse the party organisations in similar ways – campaigning to make their party strong, campaigning to make the progressive cause strong. Setting the target of coming in second in the popular vote would ensure that progressive parties are not side-lined in media coverage.

It could help mobilise candidates and members even in the weakest areas of the parties' organisations, for even if their work doesn't result in a seat (this time around) it would still be absolutely vital in contributing to the totality of support in the country. In a Common Cause, every party, every candidate, every local unit would count.

And now imagine the impact on the political terrain if progressives came in second, driving Fine Gael into third place. All the pundits – supporters and detractors – would

have to take notice: of this new phenomenon, of this progressive renaissance, of this 'breakthrough'.

Most of all, we could stop singing the half-party blues. All we have to do is acknowledge the most politically obvious fact in Irish politics today – that Labour, Sinn Fein and the Greens have more in common with each other than they do with the right wing parties. And remember – in the end there can be only two. It's either Fine Gael or us.

### **Do we Dare Believe?**

It's practically congenital. Progressives never allow themselves to think about winning. So no wonder they don't. It's as if by winning they might they might have to leave that cosy, well-worn, contented nest they have made for themselves. But the truly ambitious – those tired of nesting in that small, uninteresting place – might rightly ask: could a Common Cause actually win; could progressives, together, actually beat both Fine Gael and Fianna Fail in the popular vote? The answer is yes, a hard fought-for yes, but a yes nonetheless.

Currently, the gap between the combined progressive parties and Fianna Fail is 8.4%. That is a considerable ground to make up in one election. However, prior to the 2004 local elections, the gap was 22.2%. In 2004, the combined progressive parties closed the gap by 13.8%. This was due to a 6.7% increase in the progressive vote and a drop of 7.1% in the Fianna Fail vote. Could this be repeated?

Clearly, if the progressive parties got their act together, they could increase their vote. The question is would Fianna Fail experience another similar decline? Here we are in the realm of speculation. Some would argue that – at nearly 32% the last time out – they would be reaching their core vote. But, of course, core votes, like headline votes, constantly change. Would voters punish the Government at the local election? With everyday bring further dire news on the economic front, there are a lot of sins to be purged. Would even Fianna Fail voters fire a shot across the bows – if not by supporting someone else then by staying at home in significant numbers? And if people do decide to have a go at Fianna Fail, who do they turn to? Fine Gael or a new, more dynamic and interesting alternative.

If you want to play the numbers game you could argue that if progressives increase their vote by the same amount as they did in 2004, and Fianna Fail only fell by 1.8% - the progressives would win. That is a powerful argument and shows that winning is not so far-fetched. But there is another more persuasive reason why progressives could win the 2009 local elections outright – a reason that goes to the very character of vision and ambition.

Why could we win? Because we can.

Senator Barack Obama has galvanised a party and a nation with three simple words: 'Yes, we can'. It speaks, not to the drudgery of everyday politics, but to the highest ambition – the very reason why people join and work for political parties. In this 'Yes, we can', that drudgery – the leafleting, the canvassing, the public meetings, the fundraising, the writing of statements and uploading on to websites – becomes transformed. For now our work has a higher purpose, a greater meaning and a solidarity with others who share our values. And in transforming our work we can be bold enough to talk – as Senator Obama has done with obvious success – about transforming a people and a nation.

That is, ultimately, how we can end the status of our half-parties – by understanding that one of the larger parties must give way, through increasing our strength through working together, by refusing the desultory politics of 'business-as-usual' that has so ill-served progressives, and, most importantly, by believing and acting in a concerted way to make that belief real. In this way, progressives can actually 'win' the next local elections.

And Mr. Gilmore will have achieved, at least at local level, his goal.

Not a bad way to enter into his first general election as party leader.

**END.**