

Barry O'Halloran

Ireland is about to elect a radical far-Left president

The gross political incompetence of the mainstream centre will see Catherine Connolly win



Sinn Fein has opted for the least risky strategy of backing independent Left-wing candidate Catherine Connolly Credit: Niall Carson/PA Wire

 **Barry O'Halloran**
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As an example of political self-harm by establishment political parties, the current Irish presidential election will be hard to equal.

The latest opinion poll before Friday’s vote indicates that the far-Left independent candidate, Catherine Connolly, is likely to romp home in this two-horse race. With just two days to go, Connolly has an unassailable 19-point lead over her sole opponent, Heather Humphreys of the centre-Right Fine Gael party.

Humphreys ended up being the establishment candidate, after the centrist Fianna Fáil party’s candidate was forced to withdraw from the election as a result of a minor scandal regarding overpaid rent of €3,300 due to a tenant.

Sinn Fein, which poll aggregators gave a credible 25 per cent in various opinion polls over the past two years, was undecided on whether or not to run a candidate. The political risks were high. It currently sees itself in a strong position to challenge the mainstream political parties. However, if a Sinn Fein candidate polled badly in the presidential contest, it would damage its future electoral prospects.

Unsure of what to do and with no obvious candidate, it went through an “extensive consultation” internally. A month before the poll, it opted for the least risky strategy of backing the independent Left-wing Connolly. A cautious political decision with no big upside, but no major downside either. Then fate intervened.

Two weeks after deciding to back Connolly, Fianna Fáil’s Jim Gavin was forced to withdraw. With the election now a binary choice, Connolly’s chances of winning had improved immensely. Her loose coalition of Left-wing micro groups plus the Social Democrat, Labour, and Green parties was bolstered enormously by the highly organised and well-funded Sinn Fein electoral machine. With a military precision that is second nature to it, Sinn Fein mustered its foot soldiers for a highly competent ground campaign.

Connolly, a barrister by profession, came across as highly articulate and completely outshone her opponent in every TV and radio debate. However, it emerged that Connolly had hired a parliamentary assistant who had just completed a four-year prison term handed down by the Special Criminal Court (an anti-terrorist court) for possession of assault rifles. It didn’t dent her campaign and she was able to smooth talk her way out of it.

On the other hand, Humphreys came across as a political lightweight. As a result, she soon acquired the most politically toxic label imaginable by being constantly referred to as “nice”. It was a four-letter kiss of death for her campaign.

In the last of the TV debates held on Tuesday, Humphreys answered a question which, after six weeks of campaigning, could hardly have come as a surprise: “Why do you want to be president?” Her answer was beyond bland: “Because I’m a people person”.

The bigger question that arises is, did the small army of taxpayer-funded advisers working on her campaign not prepare Humphreys for such a basic and obvious question?

Holding views far to the Left of the outgoing President Higgins on issues like Gaza, Israel and US imperialism, Connolly is unlikely to show much restraint across these topics. While Michael D, as he is affectionately known, curbed his worst anti-American instincts while in office, the far-Left Connolly may not feel so inhibited.

Like the British monarchy, the Irish presidency is meant to be above politics and has no constitutional role in setting policy, foreign or domestic. However, a radical like Connolly is unlikely to adhere to such “bourgeois” legal niceties and so a constitutional crisis of some kind should not be ruled out. In this regard, President Higgins drove a coach and horses through this constitutional provision by promoting a radical anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian foreign policy stance. The precedent he created will be amplified and widened by President Connolly.

While candidate Connolly will win the presidency, the real political victor in this election will be Sinn Fein. The party will lose no opportunity to claim vindication and proclaim Connolly’s victory as its own. An irony of all this is that the rejection of Heather Humphreys, one of the very few Presbyterians in Irish politics, will not be lost on Northern Irish protestants, the largest protestant denomination of whom are Presbyterian.

The ineptitude shown by the mainstream political parties from the start of this election is difficult to imagine. Putting the Irish political Humpty Dumpty back together again will be nigh impossible. We may be witnessing a watershed moment in Irish politics as the era of the dominance of the two main parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, comes to an end. A dominance that has lasted for almost a century.

And the greatest irony of all is that if this radical transformation of the Irish political landscape does come about, it will not be the result of strategic brilliance by the Left, but because of gross political incompetence by the mainstream centre.