

Barry O'Halloran

Ireland's political mainstream is being ripped apart at the seams

One wonders what lies ahead if president-elect Catherine Connolly's desire for a referendum on unity comes to pass



The size of Catherine Connolly's victory at 63 per cent makes this election especially noteworthy Credit: Niall Carson/PA Wire

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It's the Halloween bank holiday weekend in Ireland, and the boundaries between the living and political dead have never been so blurred. The scariest electoral story for decades was delivered to the two main political parties on Saturday evening. Having won by a landslide, the far-Left Catherine Connolly will be the next president of Ireland. One of the first to congratulate her on social media was Jeremy Corbyn.

Not since the 2011 general election has the Irish electorate been so bloody-minded towards its main political parties. Back then, and with considerable justification, Irish voters blamed Fianna Fáil for the financial crisis and the resultant humiliation of an IMF bailout. Having dominated Irish politics since the 1930s, Fianna Fáil suffered a near-death experience in 2011. Although it recovered, the party never again reached the heights of its former electoral glory.

The turnout in this year's presidential election was low (46 per cent), but it was the size of Connolly's victory at 63 per cent, and the fact that it was achieved by a unified campaign of the normally fragmented Left that makes this election especially noteworthy. However, its overriding political significance can be summed up in two words: Sinn Féin.

Sinn Féin, already in government in Northern Ireland, has been straining every sinew and muscle for decades to do the same in the Republic. From that party's perspective, this would create a united Ireland – at least, by proxy – and would constitute a major step towards eventual unity.

With the ideological stakes so high, the party dithered for months about whether or not to run a candidate. If such a candidate did badly in the polls it could be a major setback in Sinn Féin's quest for political power in both parts of the island. Late in the day, the party finally decided to throw its considerable political resources behind Connolly's campaign. As a consequence, Sinn Féin is now basking in the reflected glory of president-elect Connolly's victory.

Apart from the result, which in time might turn out to be a turning point in Irish political history, there is one other aspect that makes this election literally unique. The number of spoilt votes in Irish elections has always hovered around 1 per cent. In this election, however, the number of spoilt votes was a staggering 13 per cent.

The reasons for this inordinately high number can be gleaned from the manner in which some people spoilt their votes. Two common handwritten messages on many spoilt ballot papers read, "Maria Steen No.1" and the more cryptic "She was only 10".

The nomination process for presidential candidates is tightly controlled by the mainstream political parties. Only those who can get the backing of 20 parliamentary representatives or the majority of four county or city councils can run for president. The social conservative, Maria Steen, got 18 parliamentary backers but fell short by two and was excluded from the election. Viewed by her supporters as government censorship of social conservatism, they organised a "Spoil Your Vote" campaign.

The other message on some spoilt papers, "She was only 10", is a reference to an alleged sexual assault on a child by a 26-year-old asylum-seeker of "African origin" staying at a government-owned migrant hotel in West Dublin. The incident happened just days before the vote and there were violent riots outside the hotel when the news broke. Up to 50 per cent of ballot papers in parts of that constituency were spoilt.

Not turning up to an election is one thing, but deliberately spoiling ballot papers on this scale is a clear political message from those who feel either disenfranchised or ignored. As in many other countries, failure of the political elites of both Left and Right to respond to these signals only leads to greater political turbulence at a later juncture.

A further ominous trend only emerged on Friday. Speaking at her local count centre in Monaghan, the defeated Heather Humphreys, Fine Gael's Ulster Presbyterian presidential candidate revealed that she had experienced sustained sectarian abuse throughout the campaign. "My family and I, but especially my family, were subjected to some absolutely awful sectarian abuse. I was disappointed, because as a country I thought we had moved on from that." She said that Unionists in Northern Ireland were shocked by what had happened, telling her: "If that's what they put you through, Heather, what hope have the rest of us?"

If the candidacy of a politically middle-of-the-road Protestant grandmother can so easily stir up sectarianism among supporters of Sinn Féin and the Irish Left, one wonders what lies ahead if president-elect Connolly's desire for a referendum on Irish unity should come to pass?

Given the scale of the Halloween electoral debacle for both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, it is unsurprising that rumblings of discontent have already begun over the weekend. RTE's political correspondent says there are already claims that "ten of required 12 signatures for a no confidence motion in Mr Martin have been secured".

While a coup to remove either party leader is probably not imminent, nevertheless, if that sound that both men have just started to hear in their heads is the oboe from *Jaws* – they should heed it.