

Noonan now FG favourite

By ANTHONY GALVIN

LIMERICK East's Deputy Michael Noonan has emerged as a clear front-runner for the leadership of Fine Gael after a front bench revolt has left leader John Bruton reeling.

Bookmakers Paddy Power have installed Deputy Noonan as 1/2 favourite to be the new leader of the opposition, if Deputy Bruton loses the vote of confidence at next Wednesday's parliamentary party meeting.

But Deputy Bruton has already begun his campaign to retain the leadership—despite the fact that the latest MRBI poll shows the party at an all-time low of just 16% core support, just four months before the June Euro-elections.

It was this low showing, and some long-term dissatisfaction with Mr Bruton's performance, that led four deputies to ask him to resign this Thursday afternoon.

The quartet—Alan Shatter, Jim O'Keefe, Jim Higgins, and Charlie

Flanagan—then resigned from the front bench when Deputy Bruton told them he intended to remain as party leader.

Deputy Flanagan said afterwards: "My reason for asking Mr Bruton to resign as leader was loyalty to the Fine Gael party. We believe that the fortunes of Fine Gael can only be improved by a change of leadership."

A motion of confidence in Deputy Bruton was then tabled for the next meeting of the parliamentary party, on Wednesday. The motion was tabled by Bruton supporter Deputy Enda Kenny.

Political commentators now feel that the spotlight will swing onto Deputy Noonan, who is rapidly emerging as the man to watch in the leadership struggle.

Reaction in Limerick was muted to the news. The prevailing view seemed that to be that it was too early yet to begin digging a political grave for Deputy Bruton, or to begin looking for his successor.

"John Bruton has my full public support as party leader," said Cllr Pat

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At home in Limerick: Deputy Noonan outside his house at Gouldavonher. (LL)

Blind Date bride denies that story

By CLAIRE CONNOLLY-DO

THE local couple who have become the centre of media attention throughout Ireland and Britain since getting engaged just weeks ago, have hit back at a newspaper report which suggested the bride-to-be misled the team of Cilla Black's programme Blind Date about the status of her love-life.

To be eligible for the show, participants must be single, but Anne Walker from Derry was on the show last week insists that her contact, before the programme was recorded with the man to whom she is now engaged, when he styled her. The offending article in The Sun newspaper last week claimed that she and her fiancé, Niall Flanagan, a hairstylist at CATS hair studio in Arthur's Quay and DJ, were engaged BEFORE the show that "millions of viewers saw her pick up a w long trip to Mauritius with a fellow contestant unaware that Cilla's match-making was waste of time".

"They make me so like as though I deli ately lied to Blind I didn't. I wasn't seei

Noonan

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Kennedy, Limerick East colleague of Deputy Noonan and former Senator.

"I think he is doing a very good job in spite of the difficult circumstances. I have every confidence in him, and I do not think that a motion of no confidence would get much support. I would expect that the parliamentary party would be disappointed that these people have raised the question of leadership, when Fine Gael is doing the right things on residential property tax and the North."

And Cllr Bobby Byrne said that he would not like to comment on Deputy Noonan's chances of the leadership, as the situation was only in its infancy, and it was too early to see how things would turn out.

Deputy Noonan was unavailable for comment this Thursday, although in an interview with the Limerick Leader last February he told Jimmy Woulfe that if a vacancy did arise with regards to the party leadership he would put his name forward.

He said that in the last two leadership contests he had not put his name forward because he did not think he was ready.

In the interview he said: "I think the country is bedeviled with compromisers and trimmers and fellows talking out of the sides of their mouths, and there is very little national political leadership.

"I deplore the theory of politics that says: 'There goes public opinion. I am their leader, I must chase after them and go around the front and try and lead them.' I don't think that is the way politics should operate."

Mr Noonan in that interview stated that he was embarking on a new initiative to take positions of leadership on issues affecting Irish society.

His subsequent demotion from finance to transport spokesperson was attributed by many political observers to those remarks, which the party hierarchy took as a challenge to Mr Bruton's leadership.

The motion of confidence in Mr Bruton will come before the 60 plus deputies, senators and MEPs on Wednesday.

Several TDs have been mentioned as possible successors—including Alan Dukes, Ivan Yates, Nora Owen and Avril Doyle—but Mr Noonan is the clear favourite.

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