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eBusiness
Government Services
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Law
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Start-ups
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Technology
Training
Travel

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Limerick bull replaces Celtic snail

Emily O'Reilly

Dublin, Ireland, February 11 2001

Michael Noonan brings to the Fine Gael leadership a mix of cunning and confidence, but only time will tell if his machismo attracts more voters than John Bruton.

In the end, it was a walkover. For all his western charm and relative youth, Enda Kenny failed to market himself as Fine Gael's very own Bertie Ahern.

An abysmal Prime Time performance the previous night sealed his fate with the floating voters. They floated south to Limerick, into the solid arms of Michael Noonan. All that was left of Kenny's campaign was a charming loser's speech and a lonely walk around the Leinster House plinth as the new Fine Gael leadership had their tummies tickled by the media.

In victory, Noonan was radiant. Donegal's Dinny McGinley mused about whether Noonan ever believed this day would come. The TD quoted former British Minister Richard Crossman who said of the profession: "In politics, where there's death, there's hope."

This time, it was John Bruton's long-awaited but little expected political death which catapulted Noonan into the top job. The strategy agreed between Noonan and the party's new deputy leader, Jim Mitchell, worked to perfection. The geographical balance provided by the duo -- added to Mitchell's public, as opposed to party, popularity -- provided the winning mix.

Last week's campaign smacked of Noonan cuteness. The polls showed that Mitchell was significantly ahead in terms of public popularity, and Noonan wasn't about to waste his time in trying to change that through endless media appearances.

The only electorate that mattered was the 72 members of the parliamentary party and Noonan effectively went to ground as he canvassed his colleagues. In rapid succession, he turned down appearances on Pat Kenny, the News at One and Eamon Dunphy's Last Word programme. Mitchell went in to bat instead, trading on his popularity to maintain momentum for the pair of them.

On successive days, significant front and backbenchers came out and opted for Noonan. Last Friday, seven female TDs and senators announced their support for his candidacy. Party whip Charlie Flanagan came out on Saturday, followed by Alan Shatter, Jim O'Keeffe, and -- crucially -- Alan Dukes.

The only threatening cloud came in the shape of Dunphy's Last Word

programme. Some years ago, Dunphy had tackled the story of the late Brigid McCole and the manner in which she been hounded by the state, with near-missionary zeal. Noonan's leadership heave provided an opportunity to re-open the saga.

Noonan was invited on to the programme but refused. In fact, he was refusing most media invitations for the reasons already outlined, but he was also reluctant to endure an examination of his role in the McCole saga by someone with a command of most of the fine print.

Dunphy did his best to crank it up but without Noonan, it was a rather one-sided affair. When Noonan was forced to tackle the issue on Thursday's Prime Time programme, he had his line well mapped out, to the point where it came across as slightly rehearsed.

In effect, he came out with his hands up, acknowledged his culpability and his sorrow and said he had learned a lot from the affair. By confessing to his guilt, he was attempting to close down the issue -- at least for the foreseeable future. It's hard to pick holes in a full and abject act of contrition.

By the time Friday morning's vote began, Noonan knew he was home and dry. Mitchell bowed out at the last minute, and Kenny's support base had stuck at 28, five below the number that voted against the Bruton heave the previous week.

Noonan's parliamentary party supporters told reporters that he had delivered a masterful speech before the vote and said the new leader would outline visionary new policies at a press conference later in the afternoon.

The posse arrived at the Mansion House shortly after three o'clock. Mitchell, clearly delighted at his deputy leader's position, praised the Bruton replacement to the hilt, noting that Noonan was "a man of considerable compassion".

Noonan's own speech was mildly rabble-rousing. The contrast with Bruton was immediately evident. Where Bruton was frequently overwrought, Noonan oozed confidence and calm. At times he positively drooled with folksiness. There'd be no "high-falutin' " front bench positions, he said, and there'd be no spokespersons for "lawnmowers and forage harvesters".

Under him, said Noonan, the front bench would be a meaner, cleaner machine. He'd reduce the number of front bench positions, he said. Each senior spokesperson would work a "cabinet" system -- a group comprising a senior, two juniors and a senator -- who would work as a team. In fact, the cabinet idea sounded suspiciously like a lot of jobs for a lot of boys and girls dressed up as something else.

On the economy, Noonan favoured the Berlin option. But, ever conscious of those nice people in the White House who had sweated buckets over our peace process, he did praise the delights of New York, the Rockies and the wide open plains of California.

The position of women in society loomed large in the rest of Noonan's speech, although he rather disconcertingly continued to talk about "he" and "him" when outlining his plans for the front bench.

His speech boiled down to a simple message -- women are great, really.

And not just great, but strangely equal as well and deserving of praise and childcare and tax policies that didn't whip them out into the workplace under penalty of impoverishment.

Noonan also told the gathering that he thought very highly of children, young people and old people and that his policies would be geared to, well, giving

them a better life really.

On high moral ground issues, and amid some near-audible gulping from certain TDs, Noonan bullishly announced the banning -- with immediate effect -- of corporate donations. In future, it would be the ordinary man and woman of this nation, said Noonan, who would finance the campaign to bring Fine Gael back into government -- subject to a £1,000 limit on such contributions in any one year.

In the meantime, he added, the party would bring forward a private member's bill to ban all corporate donations to political parties -- a statement which evoked mutters of disapproval from the Labour Party later in the day. Their spokesman pointed out that Labour already had such a bill wending its way through the Oireachtas, and there was really no need for Fine Gael to bother.

Sotto voce, Labour sources suggested that, if Noonan was really sincere about banning corporate donations, he could make a good start by returning the recent £50,000 cheque received from Denis O'Brien.

It was during this part of the proceedings that the real role of Jim Mitchell in the Noonan-led party emerged. Asked whether the ban on corporate donations would put the party at a serious disadvantage at the next election, Noonan replied that, with Mitchell out there spreading the new Fine Gael gospel, "we'll generate a million pounds in free publicity".

Implicit in Noonan's remarks was the message that Mitchell would act almost as Noonan's front-of-house man, rallying the public, while the less publicly-popular Noonan would concentrate on the party itself, engaging in a lengthy series of constituency tours while Mitchell held the fort back home.

The questions from the media shifted to the north. In essence, Noonan was cosying up to the SDLP -- insisting that, under him, Fine Gael would again become the party drawing allegiance from the north's "moderate nationalists". Bruton's northern policy was misunderstood, said Noonan kindly, although he knew as well as any casual observer that the problem with Bruton's northern policy was that it was understood very well indeed.

Nonetheless, Noonan's old-style anti-republican slip still managed to make an appearance. Under no circumstances, he thundered proudly and to applause, would he sit down and talk to Sinn Féin in relation to participation in a future government while the party still had a standing army.

Asked why it was legitimate to insist on unionist parties supping with the Sinn Féin devil, Noonan casually replied that the constitutional niceties had to be cast aside up there for the sake of peace. Safe in our own little bunker, he was suggesting, we could indulge in all sorts of self-righteous posturing.

Overall, Noonan performed well, delivering to a relieved party a confident, bullish, passionate outline of where he would take Fine Gael from here. He would shake up the front bench, shake up the party's internal structures, bring new vigour into the delivery of party policy and give Bertie Ahern a good old rattle.

Noonan's strongest point is likely to be his ability to perform in the Dail. Bruton was weak, his timing was frequently off, and so he missed opportunities to score the crucial hits that are picked up by the attendant media and translated into favourable copy inches.

In the early 1990s, it was Dick Spring's superb Dail performances that captured the public imagination and, ultimately, Dail seats. Noonan will be hoping to achieve the same.

His biggest negative lies, ironically, in the appeal he has for the male members of his party. His famed folksiness is sometimes coarse: the metaphors he uses

to jazz up his delivery are invariably earthy and rather male. Tractors, buses and motorcars are his images of choice.

Intellectually, he knows he has to woo the women's vote and he will come up with policies to match part of the expectation that arose from his first leadership address. But one suspects that his unconscious use 'he', 'him' and 'his', when speaking in general terms about politicians, is more illustrative of his actual mindset.

There is no doubt that, at least initially, Noonan will create a buzz around himself and around his party. The media likes him, in the sense that he is always guaranteed to deliver a decent soundbite, or launch an attack on an opponent that is imaginative and frequently memorable.

Many in Fianna Fail have said this week that they're delighted that Noonan has won, that Mitchell was the candidate they most feared because of his ability to tap the popular pulse. But they must know that Ahern is in for a far rougher time in the Dail than under the previous incumbent, and that could have implications for the Taoiseach's current popularity.

Labour appears moderately pleased with Noonan's win, but its members are cautious. It takes more than a change of leadership to reverse a party's fortunes. For the moment, they -- and Fine Gael -- are keeping their fingers crossed.



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