

Tribal rift between FF and FG goes deeper than the Civil War

By Kevin Byrne and Eoin O'Malley

In the year that has seen our traditional party system fall apart, Kevin Byrne and Eoin O'Malley show that many of the stereotypes we harboured about it may have been true.

The late Dick Walsh, the political journalist and writer, used to tell a story about his father talking to a staunchly Fianna Fáil neighbour. Discussing his loyalties the neighbour said with pride that his people had been in Fianna Fáil "since the Rising". Conscious of the fact that the party was only founded a decade after the Easter Rising, and preparing to correct him, Walsh's father asks if he really meant "since 1916?" to which the neighbour stoutly responded: "No, since 1798!" – leaving Walsh's father speechless.

Irish politics is often described as being 'tribal' but people rarely explain what they might mean by that, or what tribes they might be referring to.

The above story is actually a rare enough example of a remark that captures an aspect of what is meant by the use of the word.

The fact that both supporters and opponents of Fianna Fáil can readily recognise the 'tribal' mindset highlighted by this story, suggests that, like many jokes, it may contain a kernel of truth.

In an attempt to see if there is any real basis to this 'tribal' description, we used Irish surnames, which are amongst the oldest in the world, dating back many centuries. The wealth of Irish genealogical knowledge means the origin (Gaelic, Norman, English etc.) of almost all Irish surnames is known.

While the transmission of surnames is not 100 per cent faithful, they carry a real signal of these origins, suggesting their use as a proxy for 'tribal' origin. As markers that have been passed down for centuries, surnames offer a window on the past and a means to trace the various strands in Irish society to their possible roots and to attempt to link those strands to modern politics.

After identifying the surname origin of every TD ever elected (well over 1,100 politicians) we found significant differences in the distribution of surnames between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. While 64 per cent of Fianna Fáil TDs have surnames of exclusively Gaelic origin, only 51 per cent of Fine Gael TDs do.

The opposite pattern is seen for Old English (ie, Norman) and New English surnames, with 22 per cent of Fine Gael TDs bearing names of that origin, but only 12 per cent of Fianna Fáil deputies.

Though a surname of a given origin isn't enough to predict a politician's party, there is a significant bias in affiliation toward Fianna Fáil TDs having Gaelic surnames and Fine Gael TDs having Old and New English surnames.

There is, respectively, a less than one in 1,000 and less than one in 500 probability of these surname differences arising by chance, meaning the tribal polarisation between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael is statistically significant.

In addition, Fianna Fáil has significantly more TDs with Gaelic surnames than would be expected, given the Irish population, while Fine Gael has more deputies with Old and New English surnames than a random sampling of Irish citizens warrants.

The Irish party system has long been a puzzle. The usual explanation for the basis of the political system in the civil war is hard to sustain. The civil war, though bitter wasn't that extensive.

The differences on which Sinn Féin split were largely irrelevant within a decade or so. It is likely that the differences between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil were much deeper than just the treaty with Britain. Why else would the party system have continued to divide on these lines for so long?

The division between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael may have reflected an underlying division in Irish politics between constitutional nationalists and Gaelic nationalists, which was important throughout the 19th century.

When constitutionalists lost to the more radical 'Irish Ireland' tradition in the last 'earthquake' election of 1918, many of those who had supported the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) went on to support the pro-Treaty Cumann na nGaedheal.

Indeed IPP MPs have an almost identical distribution of surname origins to that of Fine Gael TDs but a significantly different one to Fianna Fáil TDs.

In turn, we speculate that the divisions between constitutionalist and radical nationalism have roots in an important division in the country from the 12th century; that between the Old English (Normans) and the Gaelic population. These groups were physically and culturally quite separate in many parts of the country.

The attacks on Catholicism meant the two groups formed a coalition in the 1600s against new English rule, but they did not completely merge.

We suggest these Old English and the New English or Anglo-Irish formed a strong element of the support base for constitutionalist politics that eventually went on to be represented by Fine Gael, whereas higher levels of support from the larger Gaelic strand in Irish society might be what made Fianna Fáil historically stronger.

It is most likely that shared dinner table discussions, rather than shared bloodlines, account for the transmission of political values from one generation to the next. Indeed, even today there is still a high coincidence of party loyalty between Irish parents and children.

That 'tribal' biases exist and have persisted over the history of the Dáil and still remain is remarkable, though they do seem to have reduced somewhat in recent years, perhaps due to increased internal migration taking young people away from their home towns and the influence of their families as they form their political views.

This might help explain the apparent breakdown of the party system in the face of the economic crisis. Crises by their nature rupture existing norms and crystallise changes that may have been going on slowly under the surface for much longer. In reality, Fianna Fáil has been managing a declining vote for the last two decades – with careful candidate strategies and an untraditional appeal for transfers masking that decline and reducing its impact on Dáil numbers.

Nevertheless, in 2002, when its very political relevance was been questioned, Fine Gael still got over a fifth of the vote. This year, in the face of extreme crisis, Fianna Fáil retained the loyalty of over a sixth of the electorate. Perhaps the tribe is not yet dead as a political force.

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