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ELECTION FACE-OFF

Dumping body parts a 'mafia-style' warning



■ Varadkar to unveil €11bn package
■ Martin hits out on health, housing

Daniel McConnell, Juno McEnroe, and Cianan Brennan

Fine Gael will unveil tax cuts and new spending plans totalling €11bn until 2025 in its bid to retain power following the calling of Election 2020 by Taoiseach Leo Varadkar.

Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are set to contest the most presidential-style general election in history, with Mr Varadkar and Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin in a race to become taoiseach.

Following days of speculation, Mr Varadkar called time on the 32nd Dáil before its scheduled return today, and announced that the country will go to the polls on Saturday, February 8, after a 24-day campaign.

Speaking exclusively to the *Irish Examiner*, Mr Varadkar said he wants to lead the next government to deliver the extra houses and health services needed — but that all of that depends of a good trade deal with the UK post-Brexit.

"We need to invest in housing, healthcare, and education, as well as rural development," he said. "All of that depends on a good trade deal with the UK after Brexit. I lead the best team to do that for Ireland alongside Tánaiste Simon Coveney and Helen McEntee."

Fine Gael will formally launch its campaign in Monaghan, while Mr Martin and his party will kick off their campaign in Dublin.

Key details of both parties' plans have emerged. The *Irish Examiner* has confirmed that:

- The Taoiseach, Tánaiste, and finance minister will be the key players in Fine Gael's campaign, with other ministers such as Simon Harris and Eoghan Murphy playing more minor roles;
- The party will promise to increase public spending and introduce further tax cuts amounting to €11bn over the next five years;
- The tax cuts and spending increases will range between €1.6bn next year and €2.5bn in 2023;
- Fianna Fáil's campaign will primarily focus on Mr Martin and finance spokesman Michael McGrath;
- The party is set to target Fine Gael's failure to tackle the drug feuds in Dublin and Drogheda;
- Fianna Fáil will offer tax

breaks for small businesses. According to Fine Gael sources, the party's slogan, 'A Future To Look Forward To', seeks to make clear that progress has not yet been felt by everyone and there is more to do.

"The lessons of 2016 are learned, and well learned," said one senior source. "We will champion our work on the economy and Brexit, — but we will also not seek to eke out a 1-1 draw in health and housing. We will be upfront about those."

After informing the Cabinet of his decision, Mr Varadkar spoke to Mr Martin and other opposition leaders and informed them of his decision.

Announcing the election on the steps of Government Buildings, Mr Varadkar thanked the people for the opportunity to lead the country.

"It has been a privilege to lead this country as your Taoiseach for the last two and a half years," he said. "Thank you for that honour,

and for your trust in me."

Mr Varadkar said he called the snap election in the best interests of the country, deciding to

spare it a prolonged campaign which would have happened had he waited until April or May.

"I have always said that the election should happen at the best time for the country," he said. "Now is that time. In deciding not to seek agreement on a date for an election in April or May, I do so knowing that, even if this was possible, we would effectively enter into a three- to four-month election campaign."

Mr Martin said it is time for change.

"It's time for a new government that would really focus on tangible and credible improvements in health, in housing, and on reducing the cost of living that's impacting so many families across the country," he said.

Mr Martin said voters, particularly young homebuyers who could not afford a home, were frustrated.

"People find it very difficult to buy a house, finding it very difficult to survive in the rental situation," he said.

The opposition leader opened his party's election battle by attacking Fine Gael's newly released slogan for the campaign.



Cormac O'Keeffe
Security Correspondent

Gardaí suspect the dumping of body parts in a Dublin estate is a "mafia-style" message by drugs bosses and marks a "ramping up" in gangland violence.

Senior officers said that previous dismemberments in Dublin involved attempts to disguise the remains, but the latest incident appeared to be a "deliberate" public act, threatening not just rivals but local communities.

The body parts, believed to be four limbs, were found inside a sports bag left on a footpath in a built-up estate in Coolock, north Dublin, at around 10pm on Monday.

Gardaí are awaiting DNA tests to confirm the identity of the victim, amid fears they may be that of a missing 17-year-old boy from Drogheda, Co Louth.

Intelligence received by gardaí warned that the youth would be abducted, killed and his body parts found in a bag. Garda sources said that while this is a "strong" suspicion, they are keeping an open mind and have to await DNA results.

Detectives are investigating links between the feuding gangs in Drogheda and drug outfits in Coolock, half an hour's drive apart on the M1 motorway.

"The top theory is that this [body parts] was left deliberately, to send a message out to people," said one garda source. "It's very sinister, very mafia-style."

The second theory is that the remains were being transported to be hidden and that someone "panicked".

However, several sources noted that the bag could have been thrown into a ditch as easily as onto a footpath.

A second garda source said: "In previous cases [of dismemberment] they tried to disguise the parts, but this seems deliberate. You don't leave body parts in a big estate if you do not want it found."

The source said if it turns out that the victim is the teenager from Drogheda it represents a "ramping up" of how drug gangs deal with relatively minor disputes.

"This is a new level for gangs," the source said. "Even the Kinahan cartel didn't do this symbolic stuff in their killings. This is very vicious."

"This is about money and power and ego and cocaine. With that [cocaine] they are capable of anything."

Meanwhile, an innocent taxi driver wounded in an apparent gangland hit on his front-seat passenger in Drogheda on Monday, has been reflecting on his lucky escape.

The driver, John Myles, was hit once in the back in the attack, but the bullet exited without causing significant injury.

In an interview on LMF, he said: "The bullet went in and out, luckily enough it didn't lodge in the back, if it had gone further I would have been paralysed for the rest of my life."

"If I hadn't turned I would have been killed, my kids would have been planning my funeral."

The target, a senior figure in the Drogheda feud, escaped unharmed.

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Four key election issues

■ **Climate change:** Green credentials will be key during Election 2020 with global and local concerns likely to dominate on the doorstep and candidates hoping to cash in on a green wave and an expected surge in younger voters.

■ **Health:** With the number of people on trolleys hitting record levels this month and public faith hitting new lows, finding a cure for an ailing health system will be a central plank of any successful election bid.

■ **Economy:** Brexit, jobs, global trade wars, a pension timebomb, growing public sector demands for pay hikes, corporation tax, burgeoning national debt — take your pick.

■ **Housing:** The demand for new houses, the need for fresh thinking on social housing, the growing scourge of homelessness, rising rents and rent pressure zones — let the campaigning begin.



More women

Electioneering is divisive, but there's one issue where consensus might be profitable. Women hold a record 35 seats in today's Dáil. This represents a paltry 22%, up from 15% of seats. Rebalancing this discrimination may be one of the few things we all might agree on over the next month.

Opinion: 10

Election2020: Inside

Starter's orders

He had his mind made up two weeks ago, but finally the Taoiseach let us in on his thinking. After days of frantic speculation and considerable mudslinging between the parties, the 32nd Dáil ended its life with a whimper.

News: 4

Registration

Local Government Minister Eoghan Murphy has said there is still time for potential voters to register to cast their ballot in the general election, amid concern thousands would be denied their chance to go to the polls.

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Non-runners

The revelation by Finian McGrath — Independent TD for Dublin Bay North, Disabilities Minister, and erstwhile member of the Independent Alliance — that he would not be seeking re-election put the cat among the pigeons.

News: 5

Certain losses

On a constituency by constituency basis, I can see a net gain for Fine Gael of two or three, but only if all goes well. It faces some certain losses... As a party they haven't been as smart at their politics as they should have been.

Opinion: 10

No sharp changes

The election could lead to more spending on the 'floundering' health service but will have no immediate effect on Ireland's credit rating, S&P Global Ratings has said. But S&P expects no sharp change in policies from the new government.

Business: 14

€1m bill to place people refused council houses

Neil Michael and Eoin English

Cork City Council is facing a potential annual bill of at least €1m to accommodate people it turned down for council housing following Garda checks.

Under social housing assessment regulations, the council requires applicants

to provide details of any convictions under a number of specified statutes relating to anti-social behaviour and public order offences.

This could include individuals who may not have convictions but who may have come to the attention of gardaí and people who may still be before the courts.

However, they may not have declared this on the housing applications. There are currently 29

families or individuals in this category in Cork City and because they were rejected for council housing, they have instead been placed in private, emergency accommodation.

This brings them in contact with some of the most vulnerable people in society, including homeless single mothers and their children.

On average, private accommodation in Cork City is about €111 a night and the bill for the 29 families or individuals is estimated to be at least €22,000 a week, or more than €1m a year.

At a meeting of Cork City Council on Monday, Fianna Fáil councillor Kenneth O'Flynn asked how many housing applications in emergency accommodation have failed due to Garda vetting checks.

Mr O'Flynn, who is an Independent candidate in the forthcoming general election, was told there were 29 families/individual applicants in homeless services in 2019 that would have been considered by the council for a housing allocation but have not been made an offer due to a "related negative

Garda vetting report". This was according to Brian Geaney, director of housing, who also said the management of such cases is governed by national guidelines.

He said the issue is being looked at nationally and he expects a statement or new guidance to issue shortly.

However, the Department of Housing told the *Irish Examiner* that decisions taken locally have nothing to do with its officials.

A spokesperson said: "This is a matter for Cork City Council."

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