

Fine Gael leadership

Miriam Lord



The realisation sank in: this is different. This is a big deal

Leo Varadkar is the new leader of Fine Gael and Ireland's next taoiseach.

This is a big deal. This is different. The realisation sank in during his victory speech, as he spoke the lines that were flashed around the world as soon as he said them. They were sentences you wouldn't expect to hear from an Irish politician who has risen through the fusty party ranks to become leader.

Yes, there were glowing references to his predecessor and thanks and praise for his vanquished opponent. The usual promises of great things to come, the fervent expressions of humility and the pledge "to serve this country with integrity, passion, determination and courage".

It was a nice speech on a happy occasion when a new leader has been elected with the maximum of publicity and the minimum of bloodshed.

But it signalled more, much more, on an evening that saw a generational shift in Irish politics and a key change in attitude to those who lead us.

Varadkar is not a great speaker. His low-key delivery needs good material to command attention.

Yesterday evening, in the historic setting of the Mansion House in Dublin, Leo spoke quietly, and he captured the room.

"I think if my election as leader of Fine Gael today has shown anything, it is that prejudice has no hold on this Republic."

The crowd cheered and broke into applause. Applause for Leo and applause for themselves.

"Around the world people look to Ireland to be reminded that this is a country where it doesn't matter where you come from but, rather, where you want to go. When my father travelled 5,000 miles to build a new home in Ireland, I doubt he ever dreamed that his son would one day grow up to become its leader, and that, despite his differences, his son would be treated the same, and judged by his actions and character, not by his origins or identity."

Mother's tears

The crowd hushed. Near the back of the room Varadkar's mother, Miriam, couldn't hold back the tears. His father, Ashok, beamed from ear to ear.

Hard-bitten campaigners who would stab their grannies for a first-preference vote listened misty-eyed.

Then they cheered and applauded their new leader again and applauded themselves again for putting him there "despite his differences".

They patted themselves on the back for not making a big deal of the fact that Leo Varadkar is a gay man or that his father is an immigrant from India. Because it isn't a big deal. Smiling at the way news outlets all over the world were announcing Catholic Ireland's "first gay prime minister" when, sure, nobody paid a blind bit of difference to that at home, because why would they?

But – and you could see it in the faces of people from both sides and none in this leadership election – it was this very indifference to "origins and identity" that made them feel very, very proud.

It was a long, hot day in the Round Room of the Mansion House. The count, a



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PHOTOGRAPH: ALAN BETSON

complicated process, was held under the twinkling roof of the old chamber where the first Dáil met.

That Leo would win was a foregone conclusion. Or so most people said. Simon Coveney needed to make up too many votes from parliamentary-party colleagues who had already declared for Varadkar. This didn't seem likely, and Simon would also have to win big with the councillors and grassroots.

When the boxes for the largest electoral college – but the one with little clout compared with the votes of TDs and Senators – were opened it quickly became clear that Coveney had won the support of the rank-and-file members by an impressive margin.

Reporters blanched

Around the hall, reporters blanched. Mindful that they had already written acres about the soon-to-be-elected Varadkar, a shock win for Coveney would have been a catastrophe.

Leo's people said they never expected to win the popular vote, but they didn't look happy.

"Good enough for them", a Coveney woman said, shrugging. "Sure they were getting far too cocky and needed a good kick up the arse."

A big win among the membership for Simon would also put Leo on notice that he won't be allowed to fail.

The crowd, and the heat, grew steadily during the afternoon.

Simon Coveney took his mind off things by visiting the Bloom garden festival with his family. He met Enda Kenny there. We hear the Taoiseach – he's not gone yet – was in great form, making what can only be described as "presidential progress" through the crowds.

"I haven't seen him lifting up as many babies and toddlers since 2011," remarked a photographer. Perhaps Enda's election days aren't over yet.

Leo Varadkar had started his morning with an early visit to the gym. Then he went to Glasnevin Cemetery, where he visited the graves of Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins.

Mick Collins was the first man to know the overall result. He watched from his portrait on the mantelpiece in the Fine Gael party rooms yesterday morning as the parliamentary voting took place.

First to cast his ballot was the Wexford TD Michael D'Arcy. Last to vote was the Dublin Fingal TD Alan Farrell. Alan, a big Varadkar supporter, was repaying an old debt with his vote.

It turns out that the day after his wedding, December 10th, 2009, Farrell suffered a serious allergic reaction to prescribed medication. He was rushed to Beaumont Hospital, where a young doctor administered a life-saving injection. The intern was Leo Varadkar.

Ashok and Miriam Varadkar arrived in the midafternoon. "Miriam is a bit tense, but I'm cool about it," Leo's dad said. "We're not celebrating. We'll wait," his mother said, gently batting away an incoming microphone.

As the membership votes were counted Matthew Barrett, Leo's partner, tallied at one end of the table. He was at his post from the start, and stayed with his pen

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and clipboard – and Varadkar sticker on his shoulder – until the last ballot was unfolded.

Simon Coveney was first to arrive. The room was like a sauna. "It's not over yet," he declared as he was enveloped in the media scrum. But they didn't surround him for long, galloping away to await Leo's arrival. The winner never arrives first.

The welcome party for Varadkar got bigger and bigger. By the time he arrived at the Mansion House the footpath was heaving with Ministers, junior ministers and potential ministers and junior ministers. Tánaiste Frances Fitzgerald joined them at the last minute, standing out in a bright floral jacket.

She immediately attached herself to the winner's shoulder.

"She's got great balance, all the same. Like Rory Best, she gets in the front row and moves forward," the Kerry TD Brendan Griffin observed. "She should stick by the phone. She'll be getting a late call-up to the Lions after that performance."

Rolling maul

Leo made his way in, surrounded by a rolling maul of interchanging politicians. Apart from Frances.

"We've done it, we've done it," squeaked an emotional Fergus O'Dowd, who was sidlined by Enda. Michael Ring muscled to the front of the doughnut.

"Delighted, humbled, honoured," said Leo.

A child was produced halfway up the steps. But that was a bit too much for the leader on the learners' slopes.

Senator Ray Butler, from Co Meath, battled through the crowd. The TDs were passing Leo around like an Olympic torch. "I have him! I have him!" he roared, like a bodyguard on close-protection duty.

"Leo! Leo!" chanted the young Fine Gaelers.

"I'm so happy! I'm so happy!" squeaked Fergus O'Dowd.

Into the hall, and Ray Butler's reddening head glistened with sweat as he strong-armed Leo through the double doors, where they got stuck.

"Let him in! Let him in!" the crowd inside shouted.

"Delighted and humbled," the winner said before embracing his parents.

"It's beautiful. I'm very emotional. God forgive me," said a Simon supporter, wiping away a tear.

Simon Coveney met his rival just inside the door and congratulated him. They joined hands and held them aloft.

"Ah, Jesus, this is too much," the Simon woman said, in floods.

At 6.30pm, having battled through the crowd, Leo was declared elected. Ray Butler, in a lather of sweat, and the veteran Sligo-Leitrim TD Tony McLoughlin (who recovered from cancer last year) lifted Leo shoulder high. "Don't drop him," cried Brian Murphy, Leo's adviser, a look of terror in his eyes.

Then the formalities. A gracious and uplifting speech from Simon Coveney. And that speech from Leo.

Reporters from India crowded around Ashok afterwards. They see him "as a proud son of India", his dad said.

His mother said the leadership of Fine Gael was great, but "it was when he said his father had travelled so many miles to Ireland that I couldn't hold back the tears".

Leo is the leader. And, yes, politics aside, it is a big deal.



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