

IV. It's Showtime

Charlie Bird

Some weeks after the November 1992 general election, in which Albert Reynolds and Fianna Fáil scraped back into power with the Labour party on the back of the so-called Spring Tide, one of the most distinguished journalists around, Gerry Barry, wrote an article in the *Sunday Tribune* revealing that Fianna Fáil had 'no tracking polls'. I was gob-smacked.

I had been assigned by RTÉ to cover the Albert Reynolds' general election tour. It was particularly interesting given that this was Albert's first time leading his party into a general election campaign as Taoiseach. (In February of that year, Charlie Haughey had been forced to stand down and Reynolds had succeeded him as leader of Fianna Fáil and as Taoiseach.) Indeed, I will never forget the first day of the campaign when we travelled to Killarney, County Kerry. The joke that night from Sean Duignan, Government Press Secretary, was that Albert was already in trouble and that I had received a better reception on the streets of Killarney than the Taoiseach.

Within days it had become apparent that the Fianna Fáil campaign was going off the rails. Every morning, along with the newspaper reporters and colour writers, I'd meet up with the Fianna Fáil campaign team and head off to wherever the Taoiseach was going. Occasionally the starting-point would be Fianna Fáil party headquarters in Dublin's Mount Street. There the Taoiseach and the handlers had early morning meetings to plan strategy as the

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campaign unfolded and as the opinion polls brought more and more bad news for the party.

‘Diggie’, as Sean Duignan was affectionately known, would come out onto the steps of Fianna Fáil HQ to shoot the breeze with the waiting journalists. On the mornings when the latest opinion polls were ominous for Fianna Fáil and for Albert, Diggie would be asked for a comment. He would explain to us, in great detail, that Fianna Fáil’s own ‘tracking polls’ showed a very different picture. Duignan would tell us that their own polls showed the party to be in a much stronger position.

Indeed, such was the slickness of the Fianna Fáil election machine that the party brought over a media guru from Saatchi & Saatchi in London to advise on how to handle aspects of the campaign. The heavy-hitting Saatchi & Saatchi man, Steve Hilton, had also been offering advice to the Tory party in England.

When news leaked out that Fianna Fáil had a Saatchi & Saatchi man on board, and given that it was so novel at the time, great efforts were made to try and track him down. Eventually we got pictures of the mystery ‘spin-doctor’ while he was on the campaign trail with Albert in West Cork. Indeed, the same Steve Hilton is today one of the main full-time advisors to the new Tory leader, David Cameron.

If the opinion polls weren’t bringing any good news for Fianna Fáil and for Albert Reynolds, outwardly the party was putting on a brave face. The mantra from Diggie was always the same: ‘Our own opinion polls are telling us a different story. Things are going well.’ Behind the façade, however, Fianna Fáil knew things weren’t running smoothly. Frank Dunlop, who had been a media advisor to Jack Lynch and Charlie Haughey, was brought back on board to help shore up the defences. Such was the disarray that Albert

Reynolds telephoned him directly and asked him to drop everything and take over the running of the campaign.

It was all to no avail. In the November poll Fianna Fáil lost nine seats and dropped five percentage points. The advice from Saatchi & Saatchi, and even their favourable ‘tracking polls’, could not stop what was coming down the line.

Of course, in my naivety, I was shocked to read the Gerry Barry story in the *Sunday Tribune* and the news that there were no bona fide tracking polls. I had worked with Sean Duignan at RTÉ. He was a senior colleague and one of the most colourful and popular people in the business. If he told me there were tracking polls, I had no reason to doubt him. So reading the *Tribune* story, I realised how gullible I had been. In war, truth is the first casualty; the same might also be said of general elections.

Years later I was told that the so-called tracking polls were in fact reports from Fianna Fáil campaign directors around the country telling the party HQ that their door-to-door canvass reports were returning good feedback. These reports were turned into tracking polls in order to give a different, or better, spin to the news coming out from the opinion polls carried out on behalf of the national newspapers.

When Fianna Fáil launched its campaign back in 2002 another colourful character on the political scene at the time, P.J. Mara, is quoted as saying, ‘It’s showtime’. Once the general election campaign 2007 is up and running, that’s exactly what it will be: showtime.

The late High Court judge Sean O’Leary, who was a highly respected Fine Gael handler, once told a colleague of mine who had recently been appointed Fine Gael’s Director of Elections for a campaign in the 1980s: ‘Don’t believe anything I say for the next

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three weeks.’ It is a good way for the media and the public to approach the forthcoming general election coverage: take everything that is said in the heat of the campaign with a good dose of salt and scepticism.

Covering the party leader’s tour during a general election can be fun, but the nature of the assignment has changed dramatically over the years. Gone are the days of the church-gate meetings when the visiting party leader, flanked by the party candidates, would get up onto the back of a lorry and deliver forth on the issues of the day to those leaving church after Mass. Almost all of that razzmatazz has gone out of our politics.

Today the leaders’ tours are all about ticking off the boxes. On the basis that all politics is local, it is important that the party leader is seen and photographed with all of his or her election candidates in every constituency. Another imperative is to provide the national media with their soundbite of the day and, just as importantly, to interact with the local media. Given the significance of the local media today, especially local radio, all of the party leaders’ tours have exclusive time given over to an interview with the local radio station.

The ‘donut’ is another important part of any tour. This is where the local candidates stick as close as possible to their leader to ensure they appear in every media shot. And where would we be without the placard-carriers? It is a pre-requisite of any visit to any place that party supporters carrying posters of the leader, or the various party candidates, are placed strategically behind the leader to give the impression of a large turnout of supporters and to make sure the backdrop looks busy and bustling.

During Bertie Ahern’s first leader’s tour, in 1997, I noticed that Fianna Fáil had got this down to an art form. Every time Bertie

went on the road, even as leader of the opposition, he would be accompanied by a number of media handlers. Maurice O'Donoghue was the tour manager. He went ahead to every location to make sure everything was arranged and nothing was out of place. Marty Whelan, from the Party Press Officer, was there to deal with 'us, the media'.

The Party General Secretary, Pat Farrell, was also on the road. Pat watched from a distance to make sure there were no glitches or gaps and that nothing was left to chance. He seemed to have the job of ensuring that any images that might make Bertie look stupid or silly, and which would appear in the evening news coverage and on the front pages of the daily papers the next morning, were not allowed to happen. Then there was Eileen Gleeson, who ran her own Public Relations company. Eileen was also on the road with Bertie Ahern and was in overall charge of the media campaign.

Some images are good for a party leader, others are not. Two examples come to mind.

Late in the 1997 campaign, Bertie Ahern was on the hustings in Galway when a young female student approached him on the street and gave him a real smacker on the lips. I don't for one moment believe it was an arranged photo opportunity, but the image was captured and appeared on the front pages of the newspapers the next day. The famous 'kiss on the lips' was a talking point for days afterwards and did Bertie's street credibility no harm at all.

The same cannot be said for Michael Noonan during the 2002 general election campaign. On the front page of *The Irish Times*, on 1 May, was a photograph of a young woman throwing a custard pie into Mr Noonan's face as he arrived in Boyle, County Roscommon. In the three weeks of that election campaign, it was the only action photograph of the Fine Gael leader on the hustings.

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It was not the most edifying image for Michael Noonan. During the same period Bertie Ahern had five photographs on the election trail featured in the *Irish Times*. The Fianna Fáil tour managers are always on the lookout, making sure their man never ends up on the front pages of the papers looking stupid.

The truth is that much of what is happening in our election campaigns now is being imported from the USA, where media stage-management has been honed to perfection and where nothing is left to chance.

Welcome to the world of the rebuttal unit!

During the 1997 election campaign, Fianna Fáil was the first Irish political party to set up a rebuttal unit. The idea was imported from New Labour in Britain, which in turn had copied it from Washington. The rebuttal unit comprised a number of people in election headquarters who monitored all radio and television news output. Within minutes of hearing an opposition party news story on a particular topic, Fianna Fáil would counter immediately with a statement of its own, put out in the name of one of the candidates. The effect was that every time their political opponents issued a statement or made a comment, the rebuttal unit swung into action and issued a counter-statement. So successful was the rebuttal unit that when Fianna Fáil won the 1997 election, they established a permanent one in Government Buildings.

In the 1997 campaign, and again in 2002, Fianna Fáil employed the services of a Washington DC-based company to advise on election strategy. It is believed that a number of people from Shrum Divine & Donilon, who operated in the background during both campaigns, might be in evidence this time around.

Fine Gael has also been getting some strategy advice in recent times from a Washington-based campaign expert. It will be

interesting to see what new tactics the two main parties will employ in the forthcoming election. If the Fine Gael election campaign was a shambles the last time around, the same is unlikely to happen on this occasion. The party has a whole new election team, headed this time by Frank Flannery.

One thing that will be interesting to observe will be the timing of the daily party election news conferences. In the 2002 campaign, Fine Gael was the first to hold theirs each morning, followed an hour or so later by Fianna Fáil. That turned out to be a mistake for Fine Gael, giving Fianna Fáil the opportunity to rebut anything said by their opponents. Watch closely: Fine Gael are unlikely to make the same mistake again.

Finally, it is also worth remembering that during the last campaign only one opinion poll predicted the outcome correctly. Also remember the mantra of all party leaders when asked for comments on any opinion poll: there is only one poll that counts, and that's the one on Election Day.

On that we can all agree.

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