



CONOR LENIHAN talks to MARC MACSHARRY about Fianna Fáil's policy betrayals of its roots: on housing, corporate taxation, the EU, neutrality, party loyalty and Leo the leak



Mac the Knifed

Marc MacSharry's departure from Fianna Fáil and his steadfast refusal to entertain a return may in fact be a harbinger of things to come

MARC MACSHARRY comes from a distinguished Fianna Fáil political family with some 20 years of experience in Leinster House in his own right. In my own experience of him he can, like his father Ray, be a caustic and very direct critic when he thinks things are going wrong or are being mismanaged. This outspoken quality has often got him into controversy and may ultimately have been used by the Fianna Fáil leadership to get rid of him from the party altogether.

The party's decision to go into coalition with Fine Gael in 2020 together with 'policy drift' and Micheál Martin's autocratic approach has sparked an active group of opponents to the Tánaiste's leadership. The narrative has been that Martin has been in too long as leader, neglects to consult front-bench or any other

colleagues and was only ever focused on his own personal ambition to become Taoiseach and beyond – in short that he is preventing an actual revival in the party's fortunes on its own terms. This seems to be borne out by the opinion polls where Fianna Fáil have essentially solidified their position in third



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place. Fine Gael are almost always ahead of them and Sinn Féin are now 10% clear of both of them from a position where all three were broadly at or around the same support levels in 2020 at the time of the general election. Indeed the ascendancy of Sinn Féin is being advanced by the Fine Gael-led termination of the eviction ban which saw one poll put them on 37% with Fianna Fáil 16 points behind and Fine Gael collapsing to 15%.

In his interview for *Village*, MacSharry consistently refuses to be drawn into further criticism of Micheál Martin. "My views are well known and cover issues of policy, integrity and core principles. In any event my views on this topic are now irrelevant given that I am no longer a member of the parliamentary party and have resigned my membership of the party itself. I have no intention of returning to

the Fianna Fáil ranks. My future is as an independent for the Sligo-Leitrim constituency". He profoundly believes that the style of leadership exhibited by Martin is likely to be continued by any of his current potential successors and he does not wish to have any part of that.

His disillusionment with Fianna Fail culminated with the controversies involving Leo Varadkar leaking a confidential document as Taoiseach to a lobbyist friend and the failed attempt by the then Minister for Foreign Affairs Simon Coveney to appoint another friend and former cabinet colleague Katherine Zappone as an Envoy to the UN on LGBT+ issues. MacSharry's objection was a principled one where he resented the "buddy, buddy" aspect to it all leaving, as it did, "a bad taste about politics". He resigned from the parliamentary party rather than "hypocritically vote confidence in Coveney... Our cabinet people such as Dara Calleary and Barry Cowen were shown a lot less mercy". At a deeper level he feels that the government's policies have little by way of "Fianna Fail fingerprints on them and essentially the policies are set and a continuation of existing Fine Gael policies". MacSharry, known to be outspoken, dislikes both the policies and the arrangement of Fine Gael in office.

The surprise in Fianna Fáil circles is that he not only took himself out of the parliamentary party, the frequent resort of unhappy rebels, but went further and resigned altogether from the party following Micheál Martin's opportunistic delaying of MacSharry's return to the parliamentary party in a strange departure from practices followed for the rehabilitation of senators Aidan Davitt and Ollie Crowe who were suspended in the wake of GolfGate some months earlier.

What is more surprising from his interview with me is that he regards his exit from the party as "permanent". In one of his statements on the way out he defined himself as a socialist republican and positioned himself on the left of the party. "My involvement with the party was on the basis that we were a party of republican-mindedness, looking after the people in the terraces, in business and enterprise and in small farming families". He makes it abundantly clear he does not see those values as existing in the party anymore.

To amplify his distance from the party he mentions the Taoiseach's notion of a "shared Ireland" as something with which he does not agree. MacSharry believes that the party's previous ethos was one of unambiguous support for a united Ireland. He says "there is nothing in the Good Friday Agreement about a shared Island".

Both he and his father always brought a strong sense of republicanism to the table of the party's debate on these matters. Many



Martin's Fianna Fáil: dictated to by EU and OECD



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others, not just MacSharry, believe the party is short-changing its own history in pushing a sanitised version of the goal of a united Ireland.

MacSharry is very adamant that he is "his own man" and, in a strange way, given his strong footprint pedigree in Fianna Fail, he may in fact be better off being outside of the party.

He has surfaced a very real issue in policy terms for the party he once belonged to — the precise nature of the actual difference between it and Fine Gael.

Marc MacSharry is very vocal in his criticism of the absence of real policy discussion in the party he has left. "Historically within the party policy was very much bottom up. Members shared their concerns, as did constituents, and these policies or other concerns were fed directly to the top table of the party via the party's elected representatives and Leinster House team".

Now he sees only top-down management and a tendency to punish or remove possible dissent or debate. One suspects that MacSharry, like others in the party, has tired of a race to succeed the current leadership and has given up on changing both the leadership and the policy direction.

The fact that he cites the absence of anyone in the party prepared to change the management style of Micheál Martin means that he may silently believe that the party is on the edge of electoral insignificance. In this sense the Marc MacSharry departure from Fianna Fáil and his steadfast refusal to entertain a return may in fact be a harbinger of things to come.

Marc MacSharry has much wider concerns about the direction of Irish politics, as distinct from developments in Fianna Fáil, where he is

ready to share his anxieties. "I see policy generally being dictated from Brussels with little or no dissent from this at a domestic level". In this he instances the ease with which the current government jettisoned our commitment to tax independence over the proposal from the EU and the OECD for a harmonised 15% corporate tax rate". The bigger powers are pushing their agenda and we don't get to call the moves". This move poses a direct threat to Ireland's ability to continue luring Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). The ease with which this article of faith was abandoned surprised many. There was such an overwhelming consensus of different and successive governments of its importance it appears to have been disappeared in the blink of an eye. "Our policy is being developed out of Europe. We simply rolled over to the pressure. There is also a deeper concern on my part that our traditional support for peace and neutrality is being eroded in the context of the unfolding events in the war in Ukraine".

MacSharry has huge sympathy for the Ukrainians but, like many members of the public, is mystified how quickly the public authorities and local authority figures can set about speedily providing accommodation for them "while Irish people find it impossible to get a foot on the property ladder or access public housing". 24 emergency-build modular units are being brought into commission in Sligo to facilitate refugees from Ukraine while there are 1,500 on the Sligo housing list he mentions to emphasise the public unease over this.

"We need to be generous to the Ukrainians in their terrible plight but we also need to be as applied and efficient in providing for the general needs of the wider population when it comes to our own home-grown challenges".