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I. Campaign overview

After a slow start, the 2024 general election campaign is only beginning to pick up pace. There is just over a week to go until voters cast their ballots on Friday, November 29th.

The Cabinet met this week in its caretaker role and remains in power until the new Government is formed, albeit no major decisions are expected.

Over the last week, the electorate has continued to be bombarded by policies and election promises. All parties have now launched their manifestos leading to an onslaught of attacks in the media as the parties dissect each other's proposals and budgets.

One of the main lines of attack on all the major parties' manifestos is that they are uncoded attempts to buy votes. Fine Gael's election promises were described by Labour Party Finance Spokesperson Ged Nash as being a "Charlie McCreevy and Brian Cowen tribute act." Sinn Féin has also been the subject of harsh criticism, accused of a "piggy bank heist" on the Irish people by Fine Gael's Paschal Donohoe. The manifesto figures are based on promising forecasts by the Department of Finance that government expenditure in 2030 will be €30 billion higher than 2025 levels. Sinn Féin has promised by far the largest capital spending package at almost €32 billion which other parties have pointed out is at the expense of the government's rainy day fund. Labour and the Social Democrats by comparison have more cautious manifestos, with the parties saying they would index rather than cut taxes and instead focus on investment in services.

Polling since the beginning of the election campaign suggests Fine Gael retains its lead, with Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin not far behind. Independents are polling strongly, and are the preferred choice for one in five voters. The most recent poll, conducted on November 12th and 13th by *The Irish Times*/Ipsos B&A, had Fine Gael at 25%, Fianna Fáil at 19%, Sinn Féin at 19%, the Greens at 3%, Labour at 5%, the Social Democrats at 4% and independents/others at 20%. Additionally, a poll from the *Sunday Times*/Opinions had Fine Gael slightly lower at 23%, with the support of other parties holding largely the same. Both of these polls showed Fine Gael's support falling slightly since September and October.

Sniping between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael has intensified. Last week Micheál Martin told the *Indo Daily* podcast that the two parties should be focused on attacking Sinn Féin and called for a ceasefire. Simon Harris rebuffed his comments, accusing Martin of giving out about being attacked while simultaneously attacking Fine Gael. However, the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's party leaders looked very much aligned during the leaders debate on RTE's *Upfront with Katie Hannon* where it was noticeable how little criticism there was of each others' policies on the night.

Fine Gael continues to hit speed bumps in this campaign. The John McGahon controversy has dominated headlines and left the party open to attack. McGahon, a senator and Fine Gael candidate in Louth, was acquitted of criminal charges of assault causing harm in 2022; however, earlier this year in a civil case he was found to be 65% liable and ordered to pay damages of €39,000. Despite the difficulties his continued candidacy is causing Fine Gael, his party, including Simon Harris, has backed him.

Despite all the policy announcements and continued back and forth between parties, the election campaign as a whole has yet to capture the public's attention with a general feeling of ennui being reported from the doorsteps.

II. Prospective government formation

During Monday leaders' debate on RTÉ, party leaders were asked to identify their preferred coalition partners. Simon Harris and Micheál Martin both ruled out working with Sinn Féin, stating that the party's policy platform is incompatible with their own, and signalled that it would be open to coalition negotiations based on shared policy preferences. Harris also referenced Fine Gael's previous coalitions with Labour in 2011 and independents in 2016, as well as the present three-party coalition, indicating his openness to a similar arrangement following this election. Mary Lou McDonald stated that her clear preference is for a coalition that does not include Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil, but did not categorically rule out working with any party.

Labour's leader Ivana Bacik did not directly state whether she would enter government with Sinn Féin, and did not dispel speculation that her party is being positioned as the preferred coalition partner of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. Instead, she stated that her priority is to build a common platform with other centre-left and green parties before entering coalition negotiations. Similarly, Cian O'Callaghan of the Social Democrats and Roderic O'Gorman of the Green Party did not explicitly say whether they would or would not enter government with any particular party, and noted that they would make those decisions based on their own party's core policy priorities.

Aontú's Peadar Toibín stated that his party would not enter coalition with Fine Gael or the Green Party, citing policy disagreements, but did not close the door to Fianna Fáil or Sinn Féin. Michael Collins, leader of Independent Ireland, said that his party is open to negotiations with any party and that a whip would be enforced for policies agreed in a programme for government. Richard Boyd-Barrett of People Before Profit and Joan Collins of Right to Change ruled out entering government with Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, with Boyd-Barrett underlining his preference for a government led by Sinn Féin and excluding Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil.

III. Leaders debate

All ten party leaders from the outgoing Dáil battled it out on RTE's *Upfront with Katie Hannon* on Monday night. The debate lasted more than two hours and covered coalition formation preferences and

a range of policy issues. Simon Harris, Micheál Martin and Mary Lou McDonald, as the potential next Taoiseach, were given the lion's share of speaking time. Both Harris and Martin were largely united in defending the government's record and attacking Sinn Féin. McDonald emphasised her desire for an alternative government without Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil and positioned her party as the only viable option for change. All three major party leaders performed reasonably well, making their respective pitches and hitting out at their rivals, but none emerged as the decisive winner.

Arguably the standout performance on the night was Aontú's Peadar Tóibín who landed blows on all the major parties, particularly when describing Fianna Fáil as a "hollowed-out husk of a party." Richard Boyd-Barrett of People Before Profit also performed relatively well, attacking the Government's record on housing and Palestine. In contrast, Cian O'Callaghan of the Social Democrats, deputising for party leader Holly Cairns, appeared out of his depth, while Roderic O'Gorman of the Green Party and Ivana Bacik of Labour were largely underwhelming. Other smaller party leaders did not have a comparable impact, with Independent Ireland leader Michael Collins and Right to Change leader Joan Collins struggling to make their presence known.

IV. Fine Gael manifesto

On Sunday, Fine Gael published its general election manifesto titled ['Securing Your Future'](#) which contains four primary pillars:

- 1. Giving children the best start in life:** Fine Gael made a big pitch to parents, promising to cap childcare costs at €200 per month per child, or €600 for a family with more than 3 children. A savings account will also be established for each newborn, with an initial contribution of €1,000 or €1500 to children from lower socio-economic backgrounds from the state. The party also commits to modernising the Leaving Cert and expanding access to higher education.
- 2. Delivering homes and building better communities:** The flagship subheading of this section is the commitment to establish a Department of Infrastructure, Climate and Transport. The Department will oversee the delivery of the national development plan and unify all aspects of infrastructure delivery, from planning to execution for projects over €100 million. The manifesto also promises to deliver 300,000 new homes by 2030, with an average of 50,000 homes per annum. The party also pledges to fast track offshore wind development
- 3. Having a firmer migration and criminal justice system:** This section focuses on law and order, promising to fund 6,000 new Garda recruits and providing better Garda training facilities. Fine Gael also says it will appoint an additional 20 judges and reform the criminal legal aid system. On migration, the party's 'firmer' system includes creating legally binding timeframes for international protection applications and increased border security.
- 4. Protecting the economy and investing in your future:** The final section of the Manifesto focuses on healthcare and the economy. The healthcare section pledges to increase hospital beds by 5,000 by 2031 and to recruit more healthcare professionals. The party also makes commitments in relation to access to new medicines and clinical trials. On the economy, the manifesto promises to implement a three point package for businesses which includes a temporary PRSI rebate, a lower VAT rate of 11% for food and catering services and to establish an energy cost grant Scheme. Overall Fine Gael plans to cut taxes by approximately €7 billion over five years.

[Sinn Féin](#) immediately criticised the manifesto with Health Spokesperson David Cullinane stating that *"The Fine Gael Manifesto might as well be a list of things that Fine Gael promised but failed to deliver over the last 14 years, with some new policies copied from Sinn Féin"*. The reaction to the manifesto

was mixed, with most focusing on the €7 billion in tax cuts over five years and the additional €52 billion in spending that Simon Harris claimed is “secure and sensible”. Concerns were raised that this additional spending was predicated upon Ireland’s corporate tax receipts from Foreign Direct Investment which have been described as “transient” and could leave Ireland in a financial mess in the coming years.

V. Sinn Féin manifesto

On Tuesday, Sinn Féin published its general election manifesto entitled [*“The Choice for Change”*](#), which outlines its proposals for the next Dáil term. The manifesto identifies six key policy areas:

- **Housing:** Sinn Féin promises the largest home-building programme in the state’s history. The manifesto pledges to deliver 300,000 new homes by 2029, including 125,000 public homes. The party’s housing strategy includes increasing affordable purchase and rental options, addressing homelessness, and implementing planning and procurement reforms. Additionally, the party recommend a referendum to enshrine the right to housing in the Constitution.
- **Health:** The manifesto proposes creating an all-Ireland National Health Service and addressing healthcare crises through universal care reforms. Overall, a €15bn health capital investment programme is planned, alongside specific measures for youth mental health and disability services. The manifesto states they will adopt a “zero tolerance approach” to hospital trolleys and overcrowding. To this end, €2 billion of the Apple tax money will be used to increase capacity in our health system, notably building 5,000 hospital beds.
- **Cost of living:** Sinn Féin proposes multiple measures to ease rising costs for citizens. Including abolishing the Universal Social Charge (USC) on incomes up to €45,000, delivering €10-a-day childcare, freezing rent for three years, reducing energy and fuel costs, and implementing mortgage relief schemes.
- **A united Ireland:** The manifesto proposes steps towards Irish reunification, including a referendum by decade’s end, establishing a Department of Reunification, and creating a Citizens’ Assembly to shape this constitutional change.
- **Accountability and governance:** The party commits to strengthening anti-corruption frameworks and to carrying out a reform of the civil service in an effort to enhance transparency and accountability in public administration.
- **Climate and energy:** Sinn Féin plans to accelerate Ireland’s transition to renewable energy by establishing a €2.5bn Renewable Energy Investment Fund, reforming retrofitting programmes, and addressing biodiversity loss. The party criticises the current reliance on fossil fuels and proposes significant investment in offshore wind projects.

Party leader Mary Lou McDonald was criticised for waiting until Tuesday morning to publish Sinn Féin’s manifesto. Micheál Martin deemed the delay an insult to the electorate to release it the morning after the first leaders debate, but McDonald held firm the party had always planned to release the manifesto on Tuesday. Sinn Féin also pointed to the fact that proposals in key policy areas, such as housing and health were already available in targeted plans published earlier this year. Though Minister Jack Chambers criticised the manifesto for being weak in its support to households and businesses, McDonald maintained that people do not feel better off now compared to five years ago.

VI. Labour manifesto

On Sunday, Labour published its manifesto entitled [*“Building Better Together”*](#) outlining the party’s six missions to transform Ireland, in the areas of housing, work, climate, the cost of living, health, and

children's rights. Crucially, Labour does not offer tax cuts in their manifesto but rather pledges sustained investment in public services.

- **Housing:** Labour's manifesto pledges to build 50,000 new homes annually, including social and affordable homes and cost-rental properties. The party will establish a state construction company in the place of the Land Development Agency. The party also has an ambitious retrofitting programme and will hold a referendum on the right to housing.
- **A new deal for working people:** The party promises to enact a living wage which would be set at 66% of median earnings by 2026. The party also cites plans to end low pay, precarious employment and unpaid internships.
- **Climate action and just transition:** Labour commits to decarbonisation by ensuring 80% renewable energy by 2030. The party will phase out fossil fuel infrastructure and plans to use €1 billion from the Apple windfall to fund renewable projects.
- **Health:** Labour pledges to fully implement Sláintecare, reduce waiting lists and ensure access to healthcare. The party aims to deliver 5,000 new hospital beds by 2030, including 1,500 acute beds over five years and 20 ICU beds annually.
- **Cost of living:** Labour also plans to abolish USC but for incomes up to €40,000. They propose robust measures for regulating rents, targeted mortgage relief and a cap on childcare costs of €200 per child per month.
- **Charter for children's rights:** Under this section of the manifesto Labour commit to ending poverty for all children, to expanding access to early years education, and to ensuring every child has access to housing, healthcare, and education.

Despite speculation that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are considering Labour as a potential partner in government, Minister Thomas Byrne firmly challenged Bacik's comments on carbon tax being the key solution to funding the Climate Action Fund, at the DCU Climate hustings on Wednesday. Bacik noted that climate action as a key pillar of the party's manifesto would be a deal breaker in government negotiations. Green Party Minister and Senator Pippa Hackett welcomed Labour's references to derelict and vacant homes highlighting their shared position on this matter.

VII. Social Democrats manifesto

On Tuesday, the Social Democrats published their manifesto entitled "[For the Future.](#)" The manifesto states from the outset the policy requisites the party requires of potential government partners. This includes the construction of 50,000 affordable purchase homes, the full implementation of Sláintecare, agreement on a plan to reach climate targets, a cabinet Minister for Disability, and the cultivation of high-quality public childcare. Other notable policy proposals include:

- **Housing:** The party pledges to deliver 125,000 social and affordable homes over five years, with an emphasis on state-led construction and rental security through rent freezes and a "reference rent" system, in which a publicly accessible database lists rental prices for similar properties.
- **Health:** The manifesto commits to 5,000 hospital beds by 2030 and investment in mental health and disabilities services.
- **Climate Action:** The party proposes a Just Transition Commission to monitor and ensure progress. It also plans to install solar panels on 500,000 homes and make solar panels free for low-income households.
- **Cost of Living:** Social Democrats commit to reducing childcare fees to €250 per month. It will also introduce free public transport for under 18s and €1 fares for adults during off-peak times.

- **Governance:** The manifesto pledges to establish an agency dedicated to investigating misconduct and unethical behaviour in public institutions.

The Social Democrats echoed Labour's decision not to lower taxes. Deputy Leader Cian O'Callaghan was critical of his opponents' election promises, saying that it is not credible to offer tax cuts and expanded public services.

VIII. Aontú manifesto

Today, Aontú released their manifesto under the theme "[Our Common Sense](#)," presented as three separate documents. The first focuses on their accountability policies, the second addresses immigration, and the third outlines their vision for agriculture and rural life. A key manifesto commitment includes appointing a junior minister dedicated to reducing waste across government departments. Other notable policy proposals include:

- **Incentives for Irish professionals abroad:** To address skill shortages, Aontú aims to encourage Irish doctors, nurses, and builders living overseas to return home. The proposed incentives include financial support and planning exemptions, making it easier for returnees to build homes.
- **Establishment of a Border Agency:** The party pledges to create a new Border Agency to ensure strict and efficient enforcement of immigration laws. This initiative seeks to streamline immigration processes while maintaining robust control.
- **End the outsourcing of OPW (Office of Public Works) contracts:** The party commits to ensuring these contracts are managed internally for better scrutiny.

IX. Other policy launches

Fine Gael

- **Safe and Secure Ireland:** Increase Garda recruitment and improve Garda Training ([link](#))
- **Health and Disability:** Ensure quicker access to health services and better health outcomes ([link](#))

Fianna Fáil

- **Tackling Crime:** Expand the Garda force by 5000 and ensure members have the equipment and technology ([link](#))
- **Education:** Plans to reduce the student teacher ratio to 19:1 ([link](#))

Sinn Féin

- **Housing:** Programme to deliver over 300,000 new homes ([link](#))
- **Childcare:** Affordable childcare plan, giving all parents access to €10 a day per child ([link](#))

Green Party

- **Warmer Homes:** The establishment of an equity-based retrofit scheme ([link](#))
- **Children's Charter:** Increase support to parents, improve public services families rely on and protect vulnerable children ([link](#))

Labour

- **Health:** Deliver on the promise of Sláintecare with consistent funding and political follow through ([link](#))

- **Climate and Just Transition:** Invest over €16bn of extra investment in climate action over the next five years including an additional €10bn for public transport projects ([link](#))
- **Crime:** Build an Gardaí Síochána to 18,000 members ([link](#))

Social Democrats

- **Housing:** Build 303,000 new homes between 2026 and 2030 ([link](#))
- **Disability:** Insist on a full Minister for Disability, with a mandate to ensure a whole-of-government cross-departmental approach to disability policy ([link](#))
- **Positive Neutrality:** Invest €10 million to bring Palestinian children to Ireland for education, cultural exchanges and medical treatment ([link](#))

People Before Profit

- **Manifesto:** People Before Profit published their manifesto ([link](#))
- **Public Transport:** Free and frequent public transport ([link](#))
- **Education:** Reform the Leaving Certificate ([link](#))

Independent Ireland

- **Policies:** Details of their policies can be found on their website ([link](#))

Right to Change

- **Housing:** Right to Change pledges to build 100,000 units of public housing ([link](#))

With just one week to go until citizens go to the poll, this general election has yet to catch fire and the public seems generally disengaged to date. The bad weather has hampered canvassing and is impacting on the mood of many candidates on the ground who are reporting polite, but disinterested interactions while on the doorsteps. With the main three parties so close in the polls, a major controversy or slip up could change the mood of the electorate. But, so far many veteran election watchers are dubbing GE 2024 the most boring of recent times.