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The Future is Urban, where 'Up Mayo' Politics just won't do

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Opinion & Analysis

The Twelfth is reduced to status of sideshow



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The future is urban, where 'Up Mayo' politics won't do

As they relax for the summer, TDs should beware that a constant trend of change in Ireland's demographic has major – and growing – implications for parties whose heartland is rural Ireland

THE DECLINE in the main parties' share of the vote perfectly matches the increase in people living outside rural areas.

Asked to think about what will shape the future, most people imagine that it will be the invention of new gizmo or a war. The reality is much more mundane. The future is people and the future is urban.

The Rubicon was crossed in 1966 when the urban and rural populations of Ireland were exactly equal for the first time. Since then, Ireland's urban area and its population have increased considerably and now almost 60 per cent of Ireland's population live in urban areas across the State. Around Dublin the urbanised area has increased by about 150 per cent from 1990 to 800sq km in 2006. Residential urban areas increased 41 per cent in the same period.

Research by urban economist Brian Hughes, a member of the Government's own Expert Group on Population Projections, shows that by around 2070, more than half of Ireland's population will be living in the Greater Dublin Area. The trend is for more urbanisation, despite misguided intentions from the likes of the National Spatial Strategy.

This, of course, has serious implications for Irish political parties, because urban voters are different. They have different needs, different values, and different approaches. The more urbanised Ireland becomes, the more political parties are going to have to adapt in order to get their vote.

Despite occasional short-term positive showings in polls, the overall trends in

percentages of votes for the three major parties since the 1965 election have all been downward. The slope is noticeable but not yet lethal and most noticeable for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

But as the pace of urbanisation increases, this downward trend will accelerate, and the main political parties are going to find themselves in the tricky position of trying to appeal to both their rural and urban potential electorate.

It is significant that the downward trend applies to all three parties, suggesting that it is not just the parties' individual policies which are turning voters off but their political style and culture. The "Up Mayo" political ethos doesn't wash as well in urban areas.

Urban voters will therefore make life difficult for the main rural-based parties because they have different priorities. They are less laissez-faire, and more demanding of immediate results. They want better public transport systems, more guards on the street, more lighting, less traffic, less drugs on the corners, speed ramps, school crossing wardens. Essentially they want things that will make living in close proximity to other people more bearable. And they want it now.

What they are perhaps less interested in are farming subsidies, rural renewal schemes, relaxation of drink-driving legislation, and stag-hunting. Of course, rural voters too have their own legitimate requirements which are often in direct opposition to those of their urban compatriots. What's a politician to do?

Continued urbanisation is going to exacerbate and exaggerate significantly the differences between the two groups. The debate over stag hunting was really the thin end of the wedge about whether or not to acknowledge the increasingly important requirements of urban voters, perhaps to the disapproval of rural constituents and representatives. The heave against Enda Kenny was a fight between new urban and old rural Fine Gael. Again "Up Mayo" gave the game away on that one, a cry far more significant than Cllr Joe Mellet no doubt intended.

The parties with a consistent upward trend – and here we have put together all the "other" parties, some more mainstream than others, some no longer in existence – are the parties at the edge, and where they are in the ascendancy is in urban areas. In all of the Dublin area's council constituencies Fianna Fáil has 14 per cent of seats while these "others" have over 22 per cent.

By 2012 the main parties may not have decided whether to shift tactics towards wooing the urban voters, but by the election in 2017 the swing will have taken place. Politically, for their own survival, they cannot afford not to. But what does wooing urban voters actually mean?

It might mean having to create a minister for the greater Dublin area, which is, after all, an area that will have nearly 2½ million people in the next 15 years. We currently have both a Minister and Minister of State for the Gaeltacht, with about 92,000 people, or just 2.1 per cent of the total population, but no minister with responsibility for the region that drives the economy. A successful economic engine means a smoother ride for the entire country, but the main parties are, perhaps

understandably, fearful of acknowledging that message at the risk of alienating their rural voters.

Wooing urban voters also means being much more responsive and effective in solving specific issues such as crime, congestion and the delivery of services.

Later these will turn into grander urban plans such as Rudy Giuliani's crusade to clean up New York, and those that have revitalised cities such as Barcelona, London and Lyon. These more ambitious cities all have highly evolved city-based political and administrative systems which have high levels of fiscal and policy autonomy. This is currently a long way from our incredibly centralised system.

Potential urban voters will want to see proper integrated ideas for the future development of their area, whether that is Limerick, Cork or any other urban location. To date these have been delivered piecemeal, but urban voters are different, more demanding, and increasingly well-educated. Politicians who defend transport lines which do not join up will be laughed off the hustings. Bus services which suit the bus companies and not the customers will be reformed by politicians who want to retain their seats.

It's do or die in urban voterland.

The Achilles' heel for rural-based parties is, of course, jobs. Jobs follow people, so there will be more jobs where there are more people, and where there are jobs there will be money to spend and tax.

Most of the last significant job announcements have been in the Dublin region, as companies, especially specialist and foreign-direct-investment employers, want to locate where there are large employment catchment areas, and people naturally follow to get jobs, and subsequently settle there. And then they vote.

Urbanisation is unstoppable, and it's where future votes and voters are.

Demographic and electoral trends tell us that if the main political parties want to survive then they need to radically alter their tactics.

If they don't, then they will become the parties at the edge.

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LORCAN SIRR and CONOR SKEHAN

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A thronged Grafton Street in Dublin. We have a Minister and Minister of State for the Gaeltacht, but no minister with responsibility for the region that drives the economy. Photograph: Bryan O'Brien

Voting Trends 1967 - 2007

