Irish government faces electoral rout

By Steve James

Both parties in the Irish government are facing electoral disaster when they finally go to the polls. A general election is due to be held this spring, but the latest, but the coalition government of Fianna Fáil and the Greens is unlikely to last that long.

Recent opinion polls suggest that Fianna Fáil, the largest political party for the entire history of the Irish republic, will be reduced to third place in the forthcoming General Election, while the Greens will face near obliteration.

A poll by the Sunday Business Post in June gave Fianna Fáil 24 per cent of the vote, against 42 per cent in the 2007 general election. This would reduce the party from 78 seats in the Dáil to around 41. The Greens, with 6 per cent of the vote in 2007, would lose all of their seats.

The main winners are Fine Gael, the traditional conservative opposition party, and the Irish Labour Party. Fine Gael’s share of popular support has risen from 27 per cent in 2007 to 40 per cent in 2009. Its current level of support would translate to 65 seats. More dramatic is the rise in support for the Labour Party. Labour polled only 10 per cent in 2007, but has risen to 27 per cent of the vote and 48 seats. Mushroming support for the Labour Party has coincided with the onset of financial crisis and recession. Gerry Adams’ Sinn Fein made no progress.

Another question in the same poll suggested 40 per cent of voters would support Fianna Fáil if it dissolved. Former Taoiseach Gilmore as Taoiseach, prime minister, against 28 per cent for Fine Gael leader Enda Kenny. The present incumbent, Brian Cowen, mustered only 18 per cent.

The poll result and the high profile given in the media indicate that the political establishment consider the Fianna Fáil-led coalition is exhausted and may fall apart at any time. Recent vote on banning stag hunting saw the government lose the vote, while Fianna Fáil and the Greens have announced they are supporting the motion. Cowen has directed his party to avert a split, and has dismissed speculation that they would call for an early election. Theylling denunciations of Fianna Fáil’s handling of the economic crisis, the government’s 2009 budget, and the tardy passage of its proposed bank levy, are considered a more able political lead.