



After almost two years on the National Executive and with the 17th National Conference upon us, the time has come to evaluate our performance since our eventful Dublin Conference in February last year. Every one comes into the Exec. full of ideas, enthusiasm and expectation. We leave regretting that there were so many things that we did not do and maybe regretting some of the things we did do! But also, we leave proud at the contribution we have made to making Young Fine Gael a bigger, stronger and more united organisation than the one that came into our care some 20 months ago.

The National Executive has, over the past few months, tried to re-invigorate Young Fine Gael as an organisation in the third-level institutions and on the ground in the constituencies, raise our profile in the media and influence Fine Gael with our policies.

During the period of this National Executive, Ireland has changed considerably. At home, the Celtic tiger has become a Celtic pup and the sense of invincibility we had has disappeared almost overnight. As the government prepares to borrow up to £2 billion to pay for its excessive spending and taxation commitments, one wonders what a better state the country would be in if Charlie McCreevy had implemented Young Fine Gael's Budget proposals last November rather than his own. In Northern Ireland, decommissioning has finally come about and a government is at last in place. However, sectarian hatred, mistrust and bigotry that define the conflict on our Island remains much the same. The failure to ratify the Nice Treaty has caused us to reassess our relationship with the rest of the European Union and the countries of Eastern Europe to reassess their relationship with us and the events of September 11th have cast a shadow of gloom over the new world order. Ireland in 2001 enters an uncertain time. Was 2000 as good as it gets? Or is the opportunity to remodel our country in the image of a new generation still a possibility in the foreseeable future?

The fall out from the Dublin Conference resulted in a very difficult start for the new Executive. The foot and mouth crisis followed making meeting almost impossible and the cancelling of the Árd Fheis scuppered our plans to rock the party from the RDS. I think it is fair to say that the term of this Exec can be divided into two parts. The period before Clonmel and the subsequent change of leadership and the period after.

The Tipperary South by-election and the election of Tom Hayes to the Dáil was a much needed victory for Fine Gael. It was also a great victory for Young Fine Gael. The by-election had the effect of bringing together Young Fine Gaelers in a non-confrontational manner for the first time since Conference. The party was rightly impressed at the hard work put in by Young Fine Gael in Tipperary South and our contribution was acknowledged by the Party Leader at the final election rally in Clonmel. Gerry O'Connell deserves our thanks and appreciation for the work he put in as our Campaign Manager for the by-election. Our success in Tipperary has since become the standard for our YFG Rapid Reaction Force, which travels the country helping Fine Gael candidates where our help is needed most. The Rapid Reaction Force took to the streets of Galway to help out Padraic McCormack TD during the Oktoberfest and will be called upon again at Conference to help in the crucial Tipperary North marginal. In Dublin, the Regional

Group has established its own Rapid Reaction Force to bolster the defence and offence in what will be the cockpit of the next General Election.

The Executive conducted two campaigns centred around the college Freshers' Weeks. The first campaign exposed the truth about Bertie Ahern, who Charlie Haughey so appropriately described as the 'most devious one of them all'. Continuity Fianna Fail as we called that party hasn't really changed since Bertie's mentor was at the helm. Populism, greed for power, an absence of political principles and a fair spattering of corruption remain hallmarks of Fianna Fáil.

More recently, we launched our 'Breaking Down Barriers' Campaign demonstrating to students that Young Fine Gael and Fine Gael are the only political organisation that have actually broken the barriers that have kept young people out of the Dail. The selection of seven candidates under the age of thirty to fight the next General Election demonstrates the party's ongoing commitment to the advancement of young people.

The Young Fine Gael Childcare Campaign has highlighted this important issue for many young people. Dublin West and Dublin North-East, most notably, went all out on this campaign, conducting surveys and hosting public meetings. Our 'Get Registered Campaign' pioneered by Elaine Byrne ensured that thousands of young people will have their right to vote when opportunity comes to turf out this awful government next year.

The Young Fine Gael branch structure in our third-level organisations has never been stronger. New branches have been established in St Patrick's Teacher Training College - Drumcondra, Letterkenny IT, the Tipperary Institute, Mary Immaculate Teacher Training College - Limerick, Tralee IT, GMIT, Dundalk IT and NUI Maynooth. Our long-established branches in Trinity, UL, UCD, NUI-Galway and UCC have gone from strength to strength. In all of these colleges, Young Fine Gael is either the strongest political force or is tending to be so. During the Freshers' period this Autumn alone, YFG recruited one thousand new members.

Outside the colleges, our Constituency Branch organisation has expanded greatly. Previously, most of our non-college branches had been in the west or south-west. This changed substantially with the establishment of Branches in Drogheda, Cavan, Dublin south-east, Tipperary North, Tipperary South, Athlone, Monaghan and Mayo. These are of course the success stories. Exec. members, more so than anyone in the organisation, can regale you with stories of branch start-ups that were not successful but nonetheless involved a lot of work by those Exec. members that invariably goes unnoticed. In the Constituencies, particular praise should go to Drogheda (Captain Stapleton Branch) for their FMD campaign which landed their Chairman a £50,000 fine and Cavan for their exceptional local PR success. Cork South-Central, as always, was Young Fine Gael's strongest urban branch. That said, a lot of work still needs to be done to achieve our aim of shifting the focus of Young Fine Gael from colleges to constituencies. Almost all of South Dublin remains branch-less, branches in Connaught and Leinster are patchy and the number of branches has receded somewhat in the Southwest. I am sure this will be a priority for the newly elected National Executive. Ha, Ha !!!



In the field of policy, Young Fine Gael produced a detailed policy paper on Childcare and an Alternative Budget. In the run up to conference a YFG Manifesto Working Group was established by the Executive. Led by Leo Varadkar, fifteen members from ten branches across the country met to draw up a comprehensive statement of Young Fine Gael policy. This is now completed and will be the centrepiece of our policy debate at Conference. The Group also drew up new Basic Principles for Young Fine Gael which are being put to the 17th Conference. The International Committee continued its good work and a Northern Ireland Committee was established whose members have taken a very active role in cross-border initiatives and contacts. Seminars on the Plan for the Nation were organised in Cork and Limerick.

During the period of this Executive, Young Fine Gael had the honour of hosting a YEPP Seminar, Council and Board Meeting in Dublin. The event was attended by sixty international secretaries and representatives from thirty-five countries across the continent. The topic of the seminar was Europe's immigration, refugee and asylum policy. YFG succeeded in having most of our policy and our approach to this issue adopted by YEPP. Delegates were treated to an exceptional Seminar and Board Members were received by President McAleese. In April, Leo Varadkar was elected to the Board of YEPP assuming the grand title of Vice-President. With 86% of the vote, Young Fine Gael once again demonstrated the quality of the work done by YFGers abroad. Only last month, Young Fine Gael have the pleasure to greet almost twenty visitors from our sister organisation in Denmark- the KFJ. An excellent programme was organised involving visits to Leinster House, the Mansion House and Belfast as well as meetings with John Bruton and Michael Noonan topped off with a seminar on the future of Europe and the role of Christian Democracy in the 21st century. Lashings and lashings of thanks have to go to members who took days out of their lives and numerous pounds out of their pockets to make this a red letter day in Irish-Danish relations. It is invariably the less glamorous work in front of a PC or in Headquarter's kitchen that goes unrecognised and unenvied when the organisation comes to consider the international work done by YFG.

Beyond YEPP, Young Fine Gael participated in a multi-lateral seminar on enlargement in Poland with our German and Lithuanian sister organisations. The event was hosted by our Polish friends in Mlodzi Democraci (MD). Thankfully the invitation came before our referendum on the Nice Treaty !!! Ten members of the organisation took part in the Seminar. It was a wonderful opportunity to give a large number of people some experience in European affairs without having to worry about the consequences! Hats off to an excellent delegation that learned fast, worked hard, played hard and did us all proud.

Recognising many of the structural flaws, which have held Young Fine Gael back, Mark O'Doherty was appointed by the Exec. to consult the branches with a view to drawing proposals to reform the Young Fine Gael constitution. Among the proposals put forward by the Executive are the establishment of a National Assembly to close the gap between the Exec. and the Branches, an Annual Conference, a Council of Constituency Youth Officers, a new way to elect the Executive and strengthen the non-college branches and a National Policy Council to prepare policies in areas where there is no functioning policy group.

Following the change of Presidency, the Executive met with the Party Leader, Michael Noonan. The Executive discussed with him YFG's Strategy for the General Election, the Rapid Reaction Force and our plans for conference.

Young Fine Gael, as always, ran a National Training Day in September. This year it was held in Dublin and was exceptionally well attended. In a new departure, the National Executive organised an Oktoberfest in Galway on the Halloween Weekend. This was an excellent success as we combined the three pillars of policy debate, action on the ground and a great fancy-dress piss up in the City of the Tribes to create a fabulous event that will no doubt become a Young Fine Gael tradition.

Two Summer Schools were held. The first was on the Aran Islands and the second took us to Bandon. Scheduling the Bandon Summer School on the same weekend as the Michael Collins Commemoration at Beal na Blath proved to be a clever move. The extraordinary turn out of young people was noted within the party and in the media.

Undoubtedly, the General Election will dominate the work of the next Executive. With that in mind, Young Fine Gael is delighted to see members such as Cllr Damien English selected to run in Meath and is pleased to see that Denis Naughten and Simon Coveney will be putting themselves at the mercy of the electorate once more. Former Youth Officer, Brian Hayes and Former Vice-President Phil Hogan, also have our best wishes. Other young candidates include, Paul Kehoe (Wexford), Fergal Browne (Carlow-Kilkenny), John Deasy (Waterford), Olwyn Enright (Laois-Offaly), Nikki McFadden (Westmeath) and Galway West Candidate. These brave souls are the future of the party. They deserve and will receive maximum support from Young Fine Gael and we are confident that we will be greeting them at our next conference as proud new Teachta Dala for Fine Gael.

Acknowledgments

Finally, on behalf of the Exec., I would like to take this opportunity to thank three special people who have been a very important part of our lives for the past two years. First of all, we would like to thank Joanne Harmon who gave us her all every day, every evening and every weekend. Joanne will be remembered most fondly for the Passion for Europe campaign, the superb Galway Conference and inventing Young Fine Gael's annual Summer School. In future years, when Joanne is spotted in the Dail bar, many of us will be proud to say that she was the woman who brought us into Young Fine Gael.

Eibhlín Mulroe, our new National Youth and Women's Officer was really thrown in the deep end when she was given charge of Young Fine Gael. Eibhlín found her feet in seconds and has been crucial in ensuring that we have been able to turn the organisation around in the last few months. Eibhlín collegiate approach, straight-up honesty and respect for Young Fine Gael's independence has made her a pleasure for us all to work with.

Last but not least, the Executive would like to thank Sarah Belton. Without Sarah, our administrative assistant, everything from affiliations to internal communication would grind to a halt. Since her appointment a few months ago, Young Fine Gael has really taken Sarah into our hearts and we hope she stays with us for many years to come.