

FF and FG tribal split traced back to 12th century

By Stephen Collins, Political Editor

There are real tribal differences between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil that date back hundreds of years before the foundation of the State, according to two political scientists.

An analysis of the names of all of the TDs who have served in the Dáil shows that Fine Gael TDs are more likely to come from Norman/Old English families while Fianna Fáilers tend to come from Gaelic backgrounds.

The analysis was carried out by Dr Eoin O'Malley of DCU (a son of former Progressive Democrat leader Des O'Malley) and Dr Kevin Byrne of Trinity College Dublin.

They based their research on the fact that Irish surnames are among the oldest in the world, dating back many centuries.

The origin of almost all of those names, whether Gaelic, Norman or English, is known.

After identifying the surname origin of every one of the 1,100 TDs ever elected, the researchers found significant differences in the distribution of surnames between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

While 64 per cent of Fianna Fáil TDs have surnames of exclusively Gaelic origin, only 51 per cent of Fine Gael TDs do.

The opposite pattern is seen for Old English (Norman) and New English surnames, with 22 per cent of Fine Gael TDs bearing names of that origin, but only 12 per cent of Fianna Fáil deputies.

“While a surname of a given origin isn't enough to predict a politician's party, there is a bias in affiliation toward Fianna Fáil TDs having Gaelic surnames and Fine Gael TDs having Old and New English surnames,” say the researchers.

They add that the probability of these differences arising by chance is very remote, so they conclude that the tribal polarisation between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael is statistically significant.

“In addition, Fianna Fáil has significantly more TDs with Gaelic surnames than would be expected given the Irish population, while Fine Gael has more deputies with Old and New English surnames than a random sampling of Irish citizens would warrant,” they add.

The academics speculate the division between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael reflected an underlying division in Irish politics between constitutional nationalists and Gaelic nationalists, which was important throughout the 19th century.

Many of those who had supported the Irish Parliamentary Party before 1918 went on to back the Treaty and ultimately Fine Gael. Irish Party MPs have an almost identical distribution of surname origins to that of Fine Gael TDs but a significantly different one from Fianna Fáil TDs.

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“We speculate that the divisions between constitutionalist and radical nationalism have roots in an important division in the country from the 12th century: that between the Old English (Normans) and the Gaelic population,” said Dr O’Malley.

The researchers suggest that these Old English and the New English formed a strong element of the support base for constitutionalist politics that eventually went on to be represented by Fine Gael, whereas higher levels of support from the larger Gaelic strand in Irish society contributed to making Fianna Fáil historically stronger up to February of this year.

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