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An opinion poll drubbing for the PD's but they are anything but beaten

Work and serve the people: how McDowell plans to bounce back



Liz O'Donnell: PDs had contributed to 'successful period of prosperity'

And Liz pledges more effort to win as well

WITH the General Election just a few months away, even their most ardent supporters admit that the latest opinion poll findings are a serious setback for the Progressive Democrats.

But party leader Michael McDowell responded in typically bullish style to the result yesterday, insisting that his critics will be 'sorely disappointed' if they think he is going to retreat into his political shell.

The TNS/MRBI poll - commissioned by The Irish Times - showed the PDs' support at just 1 per cent, down two percentage points on the last poll. It is the party's worst result in similar surveys since its foundation in 1985.

The figure, coupled with Fianna Fáil's 37 per cent, puts the Coalition neck-and-neck with the combined showings of Fine Gael and Labour.

Yesterday the Tánaiste, whose personal support actually increased in the poll, said: 'Every poll is a snapshot and this one is disappointing because it shows us at a very low support base. I wouldn't ignore this poll in any way and say we are not concerned about it. Of course we are.'

'We don't own people's votes, and we don't own people's seats either. We will go out there, roll up our sleeves over the next weeks and months and make our play for the confidence of the Irish people and

By Kate Chambré

ask them to make a judgment on whether the agenda that we put before them for the next election is one which merits their support.'

Speaking on RTE radio's Pat Kenny Show, the Justice Minister recalled an experience five years ago when, as a candidate, he came bottom of a poll, a scenario that shook his confidence considerably.

He said: 'I remember being brought out to RTE one day on the Prime Time programme when I had declared for the 2002 General Election and sitting in the studio. I was there live on camera and they ran the results of an IMS poll in my own constituency which showed me at the very, very bottom behind Sinn Féin in Dublin South East.'

'Of course we are concerned'

'And what I did was I gulped mentally and then said I will work hard.'

He continued: 'I remember sitting on the side of my bed one morning after that saying, "Have I made a terrible mistake?" And Niamh [his wife] said to me: "Michael, there is only one way to get out of this, and that's to work and serve the people." And that's what I did.'

'And I spent the following weeks and months working like a "devil" to get across my message in Dublin South East. And from the bottom of the poll I ended up topping the

poll in South East. If the punters looked at me and said "God, he's had a bad opinion poll and there he is crumpling up in public and going into his shell", they would be sorely disappointed.'

The Minister said it was vital that the PDs worked hard and concentrated on getting their message across. 'We'll be meeting in Wexford in two weeks time and at that conference we'll be setting an agenda for the Irish people to judge us on and judge our potential on,' he said.

'We have been in office for 13 out of the 21 years since we were founded and those have been the years when Ireland has done prodigiously well.'

Although Mr McDowell came out well in the survey he admitted he did not take his own result too seriously. 'Satisfaction ratings are how other people in other parties who don't intend to vote for you are rating you,' he said.

And he stressed: 'I don't think for one minute it's a case of other people in the Progressive Democrats not doing the job.'

He said Minister Tom Parlon had been 'driving' the decentralisation programme on 'against a withering gale of cynicism'. And he said Health Minister Harney showed courage over the BUPA takeover.

About his party's overall agenda he added: 'What I'm about in politics is serving the people and setting the agenda. Ireland has gone from bad to good, now we have to get it from good to great.'

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THE drop in support for the Progressive Democrats means the party will 'just have to work harder', according to deputy leader Liz O'Donnell.

Speaking during a visit to Limerick yesterday, the PD Chief Whip said her party tended to do badly in national polls given that it only had representatives in certain parts of the country.

'But that being the case the poll means that this is a very competitive election and we will just have to work harder.'

The PD deputy leader was quick to point out that her party has been in government for most of its 21-year existence.

'During that time the party has contributed to a very successful period of prosperity for this country and I think we have to get our message across that we are part of that success,' she said. Miss O'Donnell disagreed that

By Kathryn Hayes

lack of public support for health service reforms could be a reason for the party's lowest popularity rating since its foundation in 1985.

Addressing the University of Limerick's Women's Forum yesterday, Deputy O'Donnell said the public interest must come before vested interest in talks on the consultants' contract.

She believed there was a 'grudging respect' for Mary Harney across the political divide for her efforts as Minister for Health.

In a wide-ranging speech on women in politics, Deputy O'Donnell said there had never been a more important time for women to participate fully in public life in the North.

She said she was delighted to learn that a third of candidates standing for the SDLP are women.