

# Ó Muilleoir – new face of Sinn Fein or smilier version of same old, same old?

WRITTEN BY

ALEX KANE



letters@newsletter.co.uk  
@AlexKane221b

**M**áirtín Ó Muilleoir is a genuinely interesting political figure: a Sinn Fein businessman, entrepreneur, civic leader and media mogul who has a clean pair of hands and the ear of Sinn Fein's leadership. He's a tireless champion of cross-community relationships and there doesn't seem to be a bridge he hasn't crossed, an on-the-ground group he hasn't met, a community he hasn't visited or a project he hasn't some involvement with. He puzzles many unionists because they don't know what to make of him. As one former Lord Mayor put it to me, "I don't know if his return to politics (he had been out of it for 13 years) is for genuine reasons or if it's

part of some wider strategy by Sinn Fein." When I interviewed him before Christmas he told me that he had "got a call from Alex Maskey in late 2010 asking him if he would ever consider coming back".

My experience of Sinn Fein is that they don't do casual chats, so it seems pretty clear that Ó Muilleoir was being sounded out. The seat Sinn Fein was interested in was the Balmoral District Electoral Area in South Belfast – the sort of place they needed to make inroads if they were to challenge the SDLP and pose a real threat to Alasdair McDonnell.

I put it to him that Sinn Fein had approached him because he was the 'sort of Shinner' who might appeal to the softer end of the SDLP, Alliance, non-voters and even some liberal unionists. In other words he was almost standing under his own banner rather than Sinn Fein's? His response was pretty straightforward: "I wouldn't doubt your analysis in that."

Anyway, he took the seat reasonably comfortably in 2011, was Lord Mayor two

years later and emerged as one of the best known, most popular, most media savvy figures in Northern Ireland – with the status of a political celebrity.

Not bad for someone who once "wore a flak jacket to meetings of the council, was banned from the Lord Mayor's parlour and was also banned from civic events"! Shortly after he became Lord Mayor I wrote: "It's hard to see him wanting to hang around City Hall for another five years, but it's not so hard to see him wanting to be First or Deputy First Minister. More important, there are very influential figures in Sinn Fein who can see him there and want to see him there."

So it came as no surprise to me when Sinn Fein shuffled Alex Maskey off to West Belfast last October (to replace Sue Ramsey) and, in turn, replaced him with Ó Muilleoir. Sinn Fein clearly wants him in front line politics because, in precisely the same way that he was the 'sort of Shinner' who could carve out a seat in the most middle-class area of South Belfast, he's also the 'sort of Shinner' who could be a very useful replace-

ment for Martin McGuinness.

It also strikes me that the decision to field him as a candidate at the general election in South Belfast has more than a touch of mischief about it.

He certainly doesn't need the profile. Sinn Fein already has a safe Assembly seat – which is now his. If they're looking at a second seat – which would have to be one of the two presently held by the SDLP – then he is clearly being used by Sinn Fein as an electoral weapon against the SDLP rather than anyone else.

I asked him what was more important in May, Sinn Fein winning the seat or the SDLP possibly losing it: "I don't concern myself too much with all the competitors in the race, but I will stand for change and people will make their choice."

Again, I pushed him on the question of whether his return to politics was part of a wider plan by Sinn Fein: "There are higher layers in my organisation than me who may have a strategy in all of this, but I'm looking forward to standing ... (although) I won't stand if Sinn Fein ask me not to stand."

Ó Muilleoir is clearly very ambitious. He didn't return to council politics for the fun of it. He didn't take on the role of Lord Mayor to spend a year taking 'selfies' and building his social media profile. He hasn't gone to the Assembly to spend day after day sorting out housing problems and welfare benefits. He isn't crisscrossing the city – and much further afield, too – just for the sake of something to do. He has an agenda. Sinn Fein has an agenda.

The question for observers like me is this: is Ó Muilleoir a genuine new face, new generation member of the Sinn Fein leadership team, or is he just a smilier manifestation of the same old Sinn Fein? He won't be surprised by the question, because he knows that I have to ask it. I'm pretty sure that he will be in the OFMDFM office at some point and at that point everyone – including some Sinn Fein grassroots – will be asking the question.

Do I know the answer? No. He is prepared to do what Sinn Fein asks of him, that much is clear. Yet, deep down, I think he's also smart enough to know that being nothing more than that smilier manifestation of the same old Sinn Fein won't deliver the societal changes I believe he wants.