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Faith in our Coalition now fading as anxiety and fear become the norm.

As Ireland takes over the reins of the EU presidency, Eamon Gilmore, as Minister for Foreign Affairs, may have hoped that the next six months would boost both his profile and authority on the domestic front. However, this latest Millward Brown Poll, taken over the Christmas and New Year period, suggests that issues closer to home may well put him, and his party, firmly in the spotlight.

Under pressure from his decreasing number of back benchers, who are rattled by the effects of continued belt-tightening (the implications of which are being drip-fed to the public, such as this week’s revelation on cutbacks of funding of personal security alarms for elderly people), it seems now that many of the electorate has, or is losing faith with Labour’s tenure within the Coalition.

When asked should the Labour party pull out of Government or not, over one in three (34%) feel that it is time they did so, versus 30% saying they should stay the course. When we add those who are less than convinced (15% saying “it depends”), we are left with nearly half the population harbouring doubts about the junior party’s position and impact in Government.

What is more illuminating is when we look at who is saying this. Among the different socio economic groups, opinion is even more divided. Close to half (44%) of those on the bottom rung of the economic ladder (DEs, who disproportionately suffer as a result of cutbacks), want Labour to pull the plug. Contrast this with the group who are more likely to be insulated against cold economics winds, the higher professional classes (ABs) – 47% of them want Labour to maintain the status quo. Which begs the question; where exactly is Labour’s heartland?

Reflecting the current sense of unease of which direction the Coalition is going in, just 35% are confident that it will last the pace and stay in power for a full five year term; four in ten (39%) are less sanguine, with a further 10% hedging their bets (“it depends”).

So far this Coalition has had a relatively smooth ride, but with cutbacks coming closer and closer to the bone as they run out of “low hanging fruit”, this may be the year that the Government comes under real scrutiny. They can no longer fall back on the mantra of blaming the previous administration. At this stage, the decisions made are theirs alone.

Increasing frustration at the glacial progress on debt restructuring doesn’t help. The negotiations regarding the repayment of Anglo’s promissory notes in March are becoming more and more critical to the credibility of this Government.

Added to this is the ongoing Abortion debate – a minefield for any administration in this country at any time. That said, the conduct at the Oireachtas hearings this week struck a chord with many as being well managed and generally rational. The hope of the Government will be that this level-
headedness will prevail throughout the coming months, and they are not dragged into some emotionally charged trench warfare.

Looking at our day-to-day economy, and the outlook for the year ahead, there have been some mixed signals of late. In the direct aftermath of Christmas, retailers were buoyant after their best Christmas period in five years. So is this the beginning of those elusive “green shoots” in our domestic economy? Any rise in a feel-good factor would of course be welcomed by both Government parties in particular.

It seems that whilst the macro-economic indicators point to us turning a corner, as a nation we are less assured. Over one in three (34%) are fearful for their jobs – a five percentage point increase since November (rising to nearly half among 25-34 year olds). Nearly six in ten (57%) are worried about paying their household bills, whilst one in seven (14%) fear losing their home (up four percentage points). Over half fear having to reduce their standard of living, although this is arguably a more subjective measure.

The demographic cohorts who are consistently most fearful are aged between 25-44 or parents. For many of them, “green shoots” are as intangible as ever. It is clear that in the short term at least, there is a deep rooted anxiety persisting for many, as the exuberance of Christmas wears off.

Nearly six years after this crisis began, now is the time for this Government to step up to the mark. Their honeymoon period is well and truly over, and fissures in public support for their programme are becoming more apparent. Whilst there are many circumstances beyond their control, they need to offer a tangible and measurable roadmap to the people, as opposed to strategies more wedded in aspiration, and an endless diet of cutbacks. They were elected on a general wave of optimism and goodwill, but these results suggest that the public’s patience is beginning to wear thin.

-  **Paul Moran is an Associate Director with Millward Brown**

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