Elections in England & Ireland

John Rhodes

IN 2004 WE spent a holiday in Leitrim during the week before elections were due to take place (on successive days) in England and Ireland. In England, the elections were for some local authorities and for the European Parliament. In Ireland, all the local authorities were included and there was also a constitutional referendum.

The differences in the approaches to democracy and to politics were very striking. Where we live in England there were no local elections, just those for the European Parliament. But how could you tell? There were no public meetings. Canvassers sneaked up to the door to push a leaflet through the letterbox and quickly fled before you could engage them in political dialogue. Posters in the windows of people's homes were noticeable only by their absence. The only party to use advertising hoardings were UKIP. A visitor from Leitrim might innocently think that this must be the farmers' party, because the posters only appeared in the fields. In fact the initials stand for the UK Independence Party, who want to take Britain out of the European Union. Using farmers to advertise their campaign was ironic, since farmers are the group in Britain to have benefited most from EU membership.

What a contrast, driving off the ferry in Ireland. The first impression was that the authorities had suddenly decided to improve the road signs. On closer examination, it turned out that every telegraph pole was decorated with an exhortation to vote for me, me, me, the candidate you can trust. What you could trust the candidate to do was not so obvious. With one or two exceptions, all the candidates appeared to have gone to the same tanning studio and photographer, armed with a salesman's smile. They all promised to put your interests first (but not to find out what they were). And does Eircom have a political balance committee to ensure that the allocation of telegraph poles to parties is made on strictly non-partisan lines?

On the constitutional referendum we assumed that the 'no' campaign were confident of victory because they apparently didn't need to advertise at all. And canvassing in Leitrim was also very interesting. Because political affiliations are widely known, we had assumed it would be unnecessary. Not a bit of it. Your first preference was solicited. And if the number of first preferences promised did not match the number given, the disappointed candidate would want to know why.

So how do the electoral systems work? I'm afraid I don't know. In England, for the European Parliament elections (but not for national or local ones) we have a form of proportional representation. The parties select the candidates for

Election poster of John McCrann, the corncrake man

gigantic constituencies (like the whole of Eastern England) and the voter is given just one vote. There then follows a completely opaque process of distributing the votes with the apparent intention of making sure that everybody wins something, so that they can all claim victory. So UKIP won some seats and have distinguished their arrival in Strasbourg by appointing a man to the women's rights committee of the Parliament with a policy aim of getting women to do more housework.

In Ireland you clearly had lots of votes (but hasn't that always been so?) and a wide choice of preferences, candidates and institutions to vote for. But the intention of the system and the result seem to have been much the same as in Britain. The 'yes' campaign proved that advertising sometimes works. And the genuine independents seem to have been wiped out by the party machines. So next time I visit I'll be campaigning for the 'Save the Corncrake Party'. At least you know what they stand for!