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# The Irish Election



The Irish general election of February 1982 was, like that of June 1981, a very close run thing. This time the Fianna Fail opposition party emerged as the marginal victors with 81 seats — a gain of three. The partners in the governing Coalition Fine Gael (63 seats) and Labour (15 seats) narrow victors in June, were now the narrow losers. In the new Dail, as in the old, 'Independents' — but now with a rather different political complexion — held the balance of power.

The result was in one sense unsurprising. The coalition had been forced to go to the country on the basis of a socially regressive and generally harsh budget. At the same time, Fianna Fail had been hampered by the marked unpopularity of their leader, C J Haughey. The real surprise was the good showing of a group of left candidates, in particular that of Sinn Fein The Workers' Party. Few 'experts' had predicted this development. For example, the prestigious *Magill Book of Irish Politics*, published just before Christmas had stressed rather the vulnerability of the SFWP's one seat in the last Dail. In the event, the SFWP not only held this seat but gained two others. In general, their vote increased by 33%, a gain described as 'dramatic' by one of Dublin's most respected political writers. Similarly, Jim Kemmy, an Independent Socialist TD based in Limerick increased his vote by 50%. Even the most obtuse of commentators acknowledged that class had played an unusually important role in an Irish election. One writer 'Gulliver' in the *Sunday Press* observed, with some show of satisfaction: 'Left wing politics are becoming serious for the first time since the State was formed'.

The same article is, however, devoted mainly to 'puffing' the prospects of another Fianna Fail government. Indeed, a month previously 'Gulliver' — who in another guise once edited an edition of the *Best of Connolly* — had spoken mysteriously of 'subversive elements' in the media and elsewhere who were trying to undermine Irish political stability by attacking its mainstay, the Fianna Fail party. Such ambiguous comments are in fact an index of an impor-

tant fact about Irish political life — the Fianna Fail party, for all its rather obviously 'bourgeois' nature, has managed to retain a 'progressive' image throughout much of its history. It has rarely lost the ability to project itself as *the* radical populist party. In this election, it has instinctively played that card again; rhetorically at least, Haughey has stressed the priority of the unemployment question over that of the budget deficit which so obsessed the coalition.

## The crisis of Fianna Fail

Nevertheless, there are signs that Fianna Fail may face unusual difficulties in maintaining this strategy successfully. The current crisis in Irish politics is above all the crisis of Fianna Fail. A party which has made a fetish of unity is now bitterly and publicly divided. It has failed to win decisively an election, which — on the historical record — ought to have been a walkover. Whatever the outcome of current attempts to displace Haughey — there is little possibility of Fianna Fail overcoming its divisions in the near future. Fine Gael, on the other hand, traditionally the subordinate bourgeois party retains a position of electoral strength well above their natural level and also possess the asset of a widely popular 'liberal' leader in Garret FitzGerald. For the traditionally weak Labour Party matters are very much more problematical — but their retention of fifteen seats was in the short term a reasonable performance. It is Fianna Fail therefore who face the most pressing problems. What are the reasons then for the unprecedented political hesitancy at leadership level? How is it possible to explain the party's recent stuttering — by its own standards — electoral performance? To answer these questions, it is necessary to look at the different ways in which Fianna Fail has maintained its hegemony in Irish politics.

There is no doubt that Fianna Fail has been the dominant political force in modern Ireland. It achieved electoral success in the thirties by its policies of nationalism, agrarian radicalism and support for protective tariffs to make possible an Irish-directed industrialisation drive.

It is clear then that while Fianna Fail's greater nationalism played a major role in determining the form of cleavage in Irish politics, other factors were also of some importance. As Erhard Rumpf has shown there were important social and regional differences visible in the catchment areas of the two main parties. Cumann na nGaedhael (later Fine Gael), who governed the country from 1922 to 1932, had the support of the more prosperous elements — the larger farmers, the higher bourgeoisie and the larger manufacturers. Fianna Fail's support came mainly from the smaller (and poorer) farmers, the small shopkeepers, the urban and rural petty-bourgeoisie and even, in some measure, the urban working class. Geographically, the split showed a clear east-west gradient; Cumann na nGaedhael was strongest in the more prosperous regions of the east and south-east, while Fianna Fail had most support in the poorer areas of the west and south-west.

In the thirties, Fianna Fail initially made a reasonably serious effort to implement its programme. Protection assisted a considerable expansion of a largely Irish-directed industrialisation drive. It proved more difficult to maintain the impetus of agrarian radicalism, however, and Fianna Fail's support in the more depressed western rural regions began to fall off as early as 1938. Some of their traditional opponents, now organised in Fine Gael, had however tarnished their respectable image by a flirtation with fascism. As late as 1938 Fianna Fail was beginning to look like the 'respectable' party of government. The second world war accelerated this process. Ireland's neutrality was electorally popular. De Valera, in particular, was widely believed to have conducted this policy with skill and subtlety. The other parties tailed after him on this question and he gained access to even wider bases of support. By the 1943 general

election, Fianna Fail had lost a good deal of its original distinctive regional and social character and it was now, in the opinion of many political scientists, a 'catchall party'.

### Modernisation strategy

The change in the party's electoral sociology implied a change in political tactics. In particular, the party's radical agrarian policy, which had been so important in 1932, was gradually whittled away by 'modernisers' within the cabinet. As late as 1942, official documents speak of the need for further large scale schemes of land redistribution to benefit small farmers and landless men. (They even praise the Nazis for their agrarian romanticism!). But by 1946 Fianna Fail ministers openly proclaimed that there were too many people on the land and poured scorn on much of the work of land redistribution. The Marxist writer Ralph Fox, in a book on Connolly published in that year, drew attention in his conclusion to this new development in the progress of the Irish revolution. He was sharply and piously castigated in the Dublin press, but Fianna Fail's steady abandonment of even vestigial agrarian radicalism was to prove Fox's critics wrong.

In the fifties, as de Valera increasingly submitted to poor health and blindness, Sean Lemass emerged, not without a struggle, as the dominant figure in Fianna Fail, eventually becoming leader from 1959-66. Lemass cast himself in the role of moderniser, though of the prudent rather than the iconoclastic variety. Under his direction, the basis of Fianna Fail hegemony was further revised and refined. With agrarian radicalism jettisoned, industrialisation strategy remained in force as the principal feature of Fianna Fail radicalism. As early as 1945, Lemass was privately convinced that protection had outlived its usefulness and was merely serving to reinforce inefficiency and profiteering on the part of the domestic bourgeoisie. Even more controversially, because it challenged a fundamental tenet of the Irish revolution, of his own party and indeed his own political past, Lemass began to view the possible penetration of

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foreign capital in a more sympathetic light. Simultaneously, Lemass, alone it would appear in the Fianna Fail leadership, was impressed by writers such as Beveridge, Keynes and Kaldor — the architects of moves in Britain towards planning and the welfare state. He spoke freely of the need for a 'new' democratic partnership with the Irish trade unions.

The Lemass strategy of modernisation faced very definite restraints. The domestic bourgeoisie feared the consequences of the loss of protection and the introduction of foreign capital. Many members of his own party adopted an 'anti-statist' rhetoric rooted in catholic social theory. Even the postwar British state was perceived as incipiently totalitarian. As a result, Lemass's strategy was circuitous and at times his pronouncements were cryptic, even contradictory. However, the stagnation and then the near collapse of the Irish economy in the fifties was to give Lemass his opportunity. With emigration running at 40,000 a year — higher than the last decades of British rule — the whole basis of Irish independence was called into question. It became possible to implement successfully hitherto unacceptable measures of economic policy.

### The neglected clue

Nevertheless, the fifties crisis remains the neglected clue to much current Irish politics. Economically Lemass's 'crude' or 'simple' Keynesianism — as one of his principal economic advisers, the legendary T K Whitaker, termed it — had one major defect: its



tendency to generate sharp budget deficit. This was visible even before the oil crisis and the onset of a harsher international economic climate. More profoundly, in this epoch, the final remnants of much traditional Irish nationalist social and economic ideology were dropped. Desmond Fennell, a widely respected nationalist commentator, sourly acknowledges this when he talks of the state being re-legitimised in purely material, ie, non-spiritual, economic terms. The emotional excitement generated by the northern troubles since the late sixties, has tended to obscure the fact that the nationalist tradition itself faces crisis.

Haughey's fumbling leadership has not been, as so many believe, merely a question of personal inadequacy. It reflects the difficulties and ambiguities of the Lemass legacy. (Lemass was appropriately Haughey's father-in-law.) When he achieved leadership of Fianna Fail in 1980, his first television broadcast was given over to a homily based on 'hairshirt' monetarist economics. He combined this with 'republicanism', that is to say, demagogic exploitation of the possibilities of the Anglo-Irish talks. When this strategy failed to achieve a genuine popular resonance, Haughey opportunistically rediscovered the Lemass 'crude Keynesian' message with a vengeance. The ambiguous result of the 1982 general election demonstrates that he has clearly not succeeded in convincing the electorate that he can repeat Lemass's successes.

### Conclusion

The vacillations in Haughey's economic policies are likely to continue. Similarly, his uncomprehending, even bovine, reaction to Fitzgerald's generous acknowledgement of the oppressively Catholic features of the Irish state may also serve to corrode further Fianna Fail's progressive image. This will give the new left deputies plenty of scope. There is a further important development. For the first time in its history, the Irish Labour Party finds itself outflanked on its left by a coherent parliamentary group in the Dail. (This is also true in the trade union movement, where the SFWP has a solid base.) For the Labour Party, which is deeply divided between Left and Right, this raises questions of great delicacy. The logistics of the hung Dail will ensure a much greater public prominence to socialist arguments — and arguments between socialists — than has been usual in Irish life. If this opportunity is not to be wasted, these debates will have to be conducted with great tact and skill.